A STUDY OF THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF AN INDIVIDUAL TO THE BUILDING OF AN ALBERTA COMMUNITY BETWEEN THE YEARS 1909--1939, IN THE FORM OF A NOVEL ENTITLED

M A R T H A

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The undersigned hereby certify that they have read and recommend to the Committee on Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled,

A STUDY OF THE CONTRIBUTION OF AN INDIVIDUAL TO THE BUILDING OF AN ALBERTA COMMUNITY BETWEEN THE YEARS 1909--1939, IN THE FORM OF A NOVEL ENTITLED M A R T H A.

submitted by Margaret Nancy Cutt, B.A. in part fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.

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M A R T H A

"of the careful soul and the troubled heart"

A Novel

by

Margaret Nancy Cutt.

The Sons of Mary seldom bother, for they have
inherited that good part;
But the Sons of Martha favour their mother
of the careful soul and the troubled heart.

.....

As in the thronged and the lighted ways, so in the
dark and the desert they stand,
Wary and watchful all their days that their
brethren's days may be long in the land.

.....

Not as a ladder from Earth to Heaven, not as a
witness to any creed,
But simple service, simply given, to his own
kind in their common need.

Kipling: The Sons of Martha)

CONTENTS

THE ANCHORAGE

The sun went down in wisps of soft cloud, peach-tinted, or primrose, a spring sky, misty and blurred, the mountains hidden, the far-off horizon vague. Then the delicate colors faded to grey, and the vast empty land, dun-colored in the March twilight, enlarged into immeasurable distance as night came on and darkness crept up along the hollows of the land. Dim and far-reaching under the wide arch of sky, lay the rolling prairie, the little hills that had for centuries remained uninhabited. The drifting herds of buffalo, the fleet, scampering antelope, the passing bands of Indians -- none of these had left a mark upon the face of the land. They passed as naturally as daylight

fades into twilight, and darkness brightens into dawn, passed to make way for the rancher and the settler.....

Into the blackness of the night, a single light streamed out, the only light visible for miles. It came from the window of Mrs. Kerrigan's parlor where a meeting of some importance was taking place.

Eight of the nine permanent inhabitants of the locality crowded the small, low parlor. It was one of the three rooms that Jasper Kerrigan had erected four years previously, when in 1905, he settled on this homestead. No haze of blue smoke thickened the air in the prim, tidy room, no interchange of casual talk rippled from person to person. The atmosphere of the meeting was strained and formal.

Some of the tension was undoubtedly caused by the fact that the group included two representatives of the old ranching interests, whom the remainder, homesteaders all, had superseded. But the matter under discussion -- the question of official recognition of the locality -- was bound to affect homesteader and rancher alike.

The lanky host, Jasper Kerrigan, chairman of the meeting, was speaking.

"...myself, I'd like to see the Post-Office called <u>Grasmere</u> after the ranch."

The owner of the ranch, Mr. Hampton-Reid, a handsome, military-looking man in his fifties, struggled to his feet with some difficulty and spoke in crisp, educated tones.

"I hope you will not think me discourteous if I say I would prefer not to have the name of the ranch used for the Post-Office. However...."

He paused briefly, shifting his weight from the leg into which a Boer bullet had crashed eight years previously. His ranch foreman, Harry Wise, sitting beside him, extricated a cane from behind the chair and put it into his hand.

"However," continued Mr. Hampton-Reid, "I should like to suggest an alternative. I propose that the Post-Office be named after the first lady to establish her home here: Mrs. Kerrigan."

With a little, old-fashioned bow towards the lady in question, he sat down, stretching out his lame leg with a little sigh of relief.

"THAT SHOULD DO IT!" he reflected. "TURN THEIR COMPLIMENT BACK TO THEMSELVES AND NO OFFENCE GIVEN!"

The chairman, husband of Mrs. Kerrigan, evidently flattered by the suggestion, nodded several times. The idea found favor in other quarters too.

"Hear, hear!" squeaked Joe Griggs, a spry, leather-faced little fellow, younger than he looked, who divided his time between homesteading the quarter next to Kerrigan's, and hauling supplies for the latter's building projects.

"That's a real nice idea!" said Mrs. Price in her flat, rather high-pitched voice.

"Suits me!" agreed her husband, a bulky man chewing the end of a match.

Dan Meade, sitting well back in the corner behind the heater, was silent, well aware that little he said or did was likely to find favor with either Mrs. Kerrigan or Mr. Hampton-Reid. His watery blue eyes slid from face to face, and he bit nervously at the drooping corner of his ragged gingery mustache.

Only the woman whom it was thus proposed to honor said nothing at all until the voices and the murmuring died down. Then looking steadily from face to face, she said, almost indifferently,

"I never admired the name Griselda, even if it is my own; but I don't want to see it as public property on addresses for the rest of my life!"

"BOWLED OUT!" thought Mr. Hampton-Reid, his olive-branch thus unceremoniously returned to him. Aloud he said,

his frosty blue eyes crossing glances with the wise dark ones,

"Griselda! A charming old-fashioned name!"

"I grew up with it in a family with good, sensible names!" retorted his hostess with some vigor. "So, although it's very kind of you, I'll just decline the honor of having the Post-Office named after me." The words were ungracious, but the smile that went with them was charming. Mr. Hampton-Reid gazed at her with renewed interest and a certain respect. He had not hitherto suspected her of perception, a hint of humor, or of the carefully controlled intensity that he sensed in her attitude tonight.

Jasper Kerrigan apparently realized that that argument was closed for ever. His slow, pleasant voice tactfully set the discussion going again.

"Well, maybe 'tain't in order for the chairman to make so many suggestions, but how about calling the Post-Office after the first baby born here?"

He looked hopefully towards the Price family. Mrs. Price was in any company a nonentity from whom the eye slid away, unarrested by any striking feature in coloring, shape or expression. All looked speculatively at the passive bundle of white on her lap, the small pink face and tiny

curled hands.

"Eileen Fay," said Mrs. Price proudly.

"Damned silly names anyway!" muttered her husband. "Can't call a place Eileen Fay. I wanted to call her something sensible like Jenny, but her mother wouldn't hear of it!"

Jasper Kerrigan stroked his long chin and tactfully skirted this ticklish domestic situation.

"A very pretty name for a very pretty little girl!" he pronounced, "but as you say, Price, for a town...."

Mr. Price grunted assent, and his wife turned the first baby born in the district back against her so the light should not fall on the little face.

"Town!" murmured Mrs. Kerrigan sardonically. "Post-Office -- if we get it!"

Mr. Hampton-Reid's grey eyebrows twitched. "PATIENT GRISELDA, I DON'T THINK!" he mused.

Jasper Kerrigan did not seem disconcerted by his wife's tartness.

"It'll be a town before you know it, -- store, church, school, elevators--" he replied cheerfully. "Let's get on with naming it -- gotta have a name to suggest, now we know we can get a post-office."

Two or three names were discussed and rejected, and Mr. Hampton-Reid moved his lame leg and sighed. Harry Wise,

his acidulated little foreman who had driven him over, remarked mockingly that the oldest inhabitants of the locality apart from the ranchers, were Bill Lilly and Dan Meade. Pausing a moment for effect, he went on maliciously,

"So Meadeville, or--uh--Lillyburg would be O.K., folks! B'sides, Bill Lilly an' Dan here has both had inteemate connection with the ranchin' an' homesteadin' of this here country!"

The reference to Bill Lilly, the squatter, passed without comment, but Dan Meade, as ineffective a homesteader as he had been cowhand, rustler and bootlegger in the past, rose in his own defence, half out of his chair.

"I dunno why this durn Post-Office has gotta be called after somebuddy," he complained sulkily. "Why not call it--uh--er--Prairie- somethin'-er-other?"

"Prairie Vista!" chirped Harry Wise; and Dan, who spent long hours in the bar-room of the Prairie Vista Hotel in Maverick when circumstances and funds permitted, turned red and faltered. Mrs. Kerrigan, an ardent upholder of temperance, stiffened and seemed about to speak. Mr. Hampton-Reid passed a hand over his neat grey mustache; Mrs. Price giggled nervously, and Jasper Kerrigan in a voice that shook, asserted himself as chairman.

"Seems to me that Dan's idea of calling the place

after--er--some natural feature of the country is a good one. Any suggestions?" Dan, thus vindicated, resumed his normal hue, leaned back in his seat behind the heater and spoke no more. Harry Wise too subsided into silence, and several names were moved, discussed, and voted on.

"Four votes for Rolling Slopes," announced Mr. Kerrigan after a count, "Two for Sunny Prairie, one for Round Hills, and one for Grassy Glen. Guess it's Rolling Slopes, folks!"

This much accomplished, the meeting adjourned. Mrs. Price and Mrs. Kerrigan served lunch, and Mr. Hampton-Reid, whose seat commanded a view of the kitchen, watched his hostess moving about. She was, he decided, the most interesting person there. Her brisk, efficient movements, her dark-clad, erect figure, her steady black eyes, were in almost painful contrast to the vague and insipid Mrs. Price. The rancher was puzzled. He had known this family for three years, had talked often with Jasper Kerrigan, and had spoken briefly with Mrs. Kerrigan on several occasions. Then he had seen only an efficient housekeeper, an ordinary, rather good-looking woman who maintained a tidy household, and had two mannerly children.

But tonight, with that suppressed excitement heightening the color in her face, keeping tension high in

the little room, she was different. She dominated her surroundings, the low, crowded parlor, the rough lean-to kitchen, without seeming a part of them. Her dark dress, severe and well-cut, became her. A quaint pin of intricately carved concentric ovals of ivory and jet, a good, old-fashioned gold watch on a long gold chain were her only ornaments.

"MID-VICTORIAN!" mused the rancher.

Mentally he transplanted her as she was, to houses he had known in the England of his youth. Outwardly she belonged there, in face and figure and dress and manner. And name -- the quaint, old-fashioned name belonged in his fantasy too... Only one thing was incongruous. The woman, capable, energetic, and no longer young, possessed the intensity that is found usually in youth, sometimes in old age, but very rarely in middle life. He wondered about her background, and, before he left that evening, asked her outright.

"Where do you come from, Mrs. Kerrigan?"

"Nova Scotia," she replied without enlarging further, and the rancher was able to account satisfactorily for the faint twang in her speech, the occasional phrasing of words that was almost Scottish but not quite.

He thought about her later as he drove home in the cool darkness. The winding trail over the lease, following

the tops and slopes of the little hills, was almost dry. Here and there in the hollows of the rolling land water glinted dully with the reflections of a few dim stars. A sudden March thaw had melted the heavy snow, and, although it was long after sundown there was no frost in the air. The faint stir of wind from the south-west was almost warm: it came and went intermittently as though the vast prairie breathed lightly in its sleep....

"Looks like they're here to stay, Boss!" said Harry Wise suddenly.

"I suppose so," concurred the other. The pronoun could only refer to the homesteaders who for nearly two decades had been crowding the ranchers back and back, off the prairie, back into the hills.

"Should never've let 'em in!" continued Harry sourly. He was an American and wont to regard the lively days of the American North-West when ranchers held their own at gun-point without too many awkward questions asked by the law, as the Golden Age. "Handin' this whole damn' country over to the farmers -- that's what! An' <u>they</u> git all the rights there is! Now this bunch've got their Post-Office, there'll be others! They're all settled in solid around Maverick now. An' Joe Griggs says Kerrigan is fixin'

to have a store here too!"

There was silence for a minute or two.

"None of them others 'ud stay if it wasn't for Kerrigan!" said Harry Wise suddenly. "Dan Meade's got no guts -- he'd pull out if he was left there alone. An' Joe Griggs wouldn't make it neither, an' that guy, Price, is so sorry for himself that he's ready to go right now if he didn't think this store an' Post-Office was comin' through!"

"Yes," agreed Hampton-Reid, and added, "I imagine if the Kerrigans have made up their minds to stay, they'll stay!"

He was still thinking of what it all meant when he entered the big ranch-house. It was the end of an era so far as this locality was concerned -- that little meeting in Griselda Kerrigan's parlor. The Kerrigans, when they came, three years previously, had been the thin end of the wedge. The squatter, Bill Lilly, and Dan Meade, ex-cowhand, ex-rustler, ex-goalbird, and now a homesteader, offered no threat to the ranchers. These two were but poor things, drifters, weaklings, who could not face life among their fellows and were pushed out and out to the very fringes of civilization, out into the wilds where the battle of life passed them by. But the Kerrigans were different. Jasper looked to the future, first the post-office, then the store.

Then would come the other séttlers, the railway... And Griselda -- Griselda was a fighter. She clung to her standards. She brought her civilization with her -- in her manner, her speech, her dress, her house. It was all around her, and in her. Homesteading on the range, - she must be forty at least - with two children... Civilization's missionary?

Men who came alone meant little in the long run. They came -- they went. But when women came .. Women, and children, and little houses on fenced plots carved out of the rangeland ... Women stayed and things changed. Griselda had stayed three years already, and that evening the rancher had seen the writing on the wall.

"She'll stick!"

.....

For Griselda Kerrigan, too, that little meeting in her cramped parlor marked the end of one era, the beginning of the next. It meant that her home had now a definite location, and was no longer a vague speck upon an uncharted waste of prairie. For the three years since her first coming to the homestead, she had, at intervals, felt utterly lost in the wilderness of rolling grassland. One hill was exactly

like another, one hollow ran imperceptibly into the next, rise and dip, interminable up and down, like the waves of the sea. Griselda, brought up on the seacoast, felt sometimes that the little house was a drifting boat, tossed on the undulating billows of the land. In summer there was a slender thread of trail, looping in and out, leading east to Maverick, north-west to the Grasmere Ranch. But in winter, the snow, covering trail and fields alike, made them indistinguishable from the surrounding prairie. Only the contours of the land remained, hill and hollow, winding coulees and long ridges, dazzling white in sunshine with deep blue shadows. Wide and empty and inimical, like waves threatening to engulf.

But now the spot was named, anchored. It would exist henceforth as itself, as Rolling Slopes, not merely as a dot, un-named on a section number of an impersonal map. Naming the dot pushed back the wide, indifferent whole that was called <u>the prairie</u>, or <u>the range</u>, or <u>the west</u>. Griselda felt a renewed confidence, an assurance that at last, after twenty years of wandering, she had a permanent home. It had seemed to her, when she came to live on the prairie, that permanence was above all things what she desired. Pattern, routine and custom were very dear to her, a part of her essential being, for she had grown up in a society largely

built upon them. She was not entirely of the stuff of which pioneers are commonly reputed to be made. Only accident and her own angry pride had uprooted her from an ordered way of life. As for adventure, Griselda detested the word, and felt that she had had enough of adventure to last her for several lifetimes.

.....

GRISELDA

She was eleven when her mother died, at their uncle's house in Halifax.

"Don't forget how much we owe your uncle, Griselda," said Mrs. Macrae. "He has been very good to us. You and the others must do what you can to repay him. I'm telling you this, Griselda, because Hector is forgetful, as boys are, and Jean is too young..."

She stopped, exhausted, and began to cough, and Mrs. Brickley, who had been Uncle Jacob Leslie's housekeeper until Mrs. Macrae and her children moved into the house, and who was now both nurse and housekeeper, bustled in and shooed

Griselda out of the sickroom.

"Be off with you -- bothering your poor mother and her so ill...!"

It had been by Mrs. Macrae's express desire that Griselda was admitted to her presence, but this fact Mrs. Brickley chose to ignore. Griselda went obediently from the room, closing the door silently, and walked sedately up the dark stairs like a little old woman in a dark grey homespun dress. These stairs were always dark, especially dark when the fog, as now, hung in grey droplets on the tiny panes of the small, high window above the landing. The grey light seeped through the clouded glass and showed a dim glint from the thick, polished banister, two brighter glints from Griselda's dark eyes, very bright in her thin, sallow face. She frowned as she climbed slowly, thinking, thinking...

Not long afterwards Mrs. Macrae turned her tired face to the wall and died, worn out by her struggles since her early widowhood to raise and support three children on a Cape Breton farm, and oppressed by the knowledge that her children would be, for a time at least, a burden to her brother. She was a proud woman, and her brother had opposed her marriage.

Her pride, her sense of obligation, and the stubborn independence that had caused her to ruin her health before

seeking the aid Jacob Leslie could well afford to give, she successfully communicated to her two eldest children. Hector did not permit the situation to trouble him overmuch: he thought of it occasionally with resentment, and otherwise went his way placidly. Griselda, on the other hand, serious and thoughtful, considered that she must fill her mother's place. That she had often done, ever since she could remember, housework, tending the poultry, taking care of Jean.

Dry-eyed, she attended her mother's funeral. Hector did not cry: neither would she. She shut a mouth that was too wide and thin-lipped for beauty, to a firm line, and the effort to keep it so gave her thin dark face an unbecoming hardness, an adult gravity.

Her Uncle Jacob, who approved Hector's stoicism on the occasion as an indication of manly self-control, was taken aback by Griselda's attitude. He felt uncomfortably that here a demonstration of grief would have been more in order upon a mother's death, tears and red eyes, rather than a set little face and a dark, burning gaze, directed, not towards the coffin, but towards himself!

Griselda did not realize how uncomfortable she was making her excellent relative. She only knew that if she looked at the coffin she would cry: she looked, therefore, at Uncle Jacob, and frowned, and bent all her thoughts towards

the problem that her mother had wished her to solve. It was not easy. What could she possibly do for Uncle Jacob that would in any measure repay the debt?

.....

She continued to wonder, year by year. Jacob Leslie was well-to-do, according to the standards by which the Macraes had lived before they came to Halifax. He had all he wanted in a material sense, and he was an independent man who did not like women fussing over him, kept his own room in order, and detested having his things tidied up by his well-intentioned niece.

To do Uncle Jacob justice, he did not expect or desire repayment. In his own fashion he derived immense satisfaction from bringing up his sister's children. He was without wife and family of his own, and here to hand was a ready-made family for whose achievements he would get much credit, and for whose shortcomings he could not be called to account. He was genuinely fond of little Jean, and she of him, and he was alternately disgusted with Hector and proud of him, according to whether the boy followed his own inclinations or those of his uncle. But Griselda was an utter enigma, and during six years of her life in his house, her uncle was rarely at his ease with her.

She was a girl of a single mind and tenacious

purpose, and for five years she was inwardly engrossed with the same problem that her mother had bequeathed to her, never nearer to a solution. She never got along any better with Mrs. Brickley. The chief cause of friction was Mrs. Brickley's insistence upon treating her as a child; a secondary one was the housekeeper's habit of reminding the children how much they owed to their Uncle Jacob. However, Griselda seldom fought this battle alone.

"I'll pay him back," said Hector hotly on such occasions. "I can do it. I'll finish school and get work and pay him back -- every cent!"

"That may be," said Mrs. Brickley drily. She was inclined to back down in arguments with Hector -- a sign of respect that she denied Griselda. "Boys can do such things."

Griselda accepted what she felt to be an implicit challenge.

"I'll pay him back too!" she cried defiantly.

"And what will you be doing, Miss?" enquired the other ironically.

Griselda -- she was thirteen then -- was taken aback. "I--I--I could keep house for him!" she finished lamely.

No idea of ousting Mrs. Brickley had entered her mind: she simply uttered the first words that occurred to

her. Their effect on Mrs. Brickley was instantaneous.

"Hey, diddle-diddle!" said she, highly offended. "And who's talking now? Cut your coat to suit your cloth, my girl! The idea! You keeping house for your uncle indeed!"

She never forgave Griselda for what she considered her scheming ways. But she showed little active enmity, and the household lived amicably enough. Griselda was not unhappy. She went to school, and for a time thought she might become a teacher and with her earnings help to pay the family debt. For a year or two she studied with avidity and Uncle Jacob seemed pleased with her progress. Griselda grew quite conceited about her learning, and Mrs. Brickley scoffed at it. The girl defended it hotly; it was her crusade.

The housekeeper laughed.

"Your Uncle Jacob would be just as pleased to see you off his hands and married, and not be an old maid for the rest of your days!"

Griselda retired in confusion. The remark had tied in rather too well with the expressed ambitions of most of her schoolmates. A year before she would have brushed off the possibility with the owl-eyed gravity that so annoyed Mrs. Brickley, for she had always been told she was plain and had, until recently, seen in the looking

glass nothing to make her think otherwise. But at sixteen she had gained weight and her carriage was good, and she had more color. Several people had remarked on the improvement in her looks, and Mary Belle Webster, who had never known what it was not to be pretty, had of late seemed somehow concerned over Griselda's appearance.

"I'm getting that pale blue!" she had confided over a counter of yard goods. "Why don't you get the dark blue, Griselda? They'll look so well together!"

It might have been an over-eagerness in the tone, or it might have been purely instinct that warned Griselda that her friend's advice was not entirely disinterested. She demurred.

"Dark blue? It's too dull -- makes me look sallow."

Mary Belle's cornflower eyes were reproachful. "You had a dark blue coat two years ago, when I had my royal blue, and everyone said how nice we looked together!"

Griselda recalled quite clearly that everyone had said how pretty Mary Belle looked, and had then turned to her and remarked politely how she had grown.

"That was two years ago," she said good-humoredly, "and Mrs. Brickley chose it. I think I'll have that wine-colored serge..."

"Oh! Not a <u>red</u> dress!" pleaded Mary Belle.

"It's not red, it's wine."

And in spite of Mary Belle's laments about the doubtful taste of wearing a red dress, Griselda wore the new frock with great pleasure and tangible results. People complimented: they eyed her with interest and surprise, and Luke Herron who happened to be in Halifax at the time, came calling. He said he came to see Hector, and Griselda did not doubt it. Mary Belle said he came to see Hector, and by the time she had said it twice, Griselda wondered. For the first time she began to think there might be something in Mrs. Brickley's ideas. Certainly Uncle Jacob was pleased to see Luke when he came (to see Hector, of course).

Then for the first time, Mrs. Brickley's attitude became quite friendly, and in spite of herself, Griselda was impressed. There seemed to be something about the state of matrimony (for a woman) that gained the respect of the world. It gave a woman privileges denied her single sisters; it put her, when she was situated as Griselda was, in the happier position of being able to confer favors. Griselda, by this time, was determined that as soon as she could manage it, she was never going to be obliged to anyone again. If there was to be any question of favors, she intended to confer, not to receive.

It was not hard for her to make up her mind to

marry Luke Herron. She liked him very well, and the advantages of such a match were so obvious. She was quite sure that he was going to ask her.

Luke himself, several years her senior, had fostered that idea, if not in so many words, by making his partiality for Griselda clear. He was a distant cousin of the Websters, a likeable, easy-going, good-looking lad who had been working for John Webster since he was fifteen. A few years before, Webster's shipping firm (in which Uncle Jacob Leslie was a minor partner) had been an extremely prosperous concern, building fast-sailing rigged ships, the SUSAN V,, and the MARY BELLE, and the SPRINGFLEET in the Webster yards at Digby, and employing these same ships in the Atlantic and coastal trade.

But now in the '80's, steam vessels were fast replacing the graceful barques and brigs and schooners, and the Webster yards had of late turned out nothing larger than fishing boats. The Webster ships, since the lumber trade with England had fallen off with the use of iron and steel in shipbuilding, made fewer Atlantic journeys, more along the coast to American ports, or south to the West Indies, and Panama, where the canal was then being built.

Luke lived at Webster's when he was in Halifax for any length of time. His return from a trip was an event

in the lives of the young Websters and Macraes, for he brought them back gifts and trinkets that had strayed from all corners of the globe to little shops in the ports. Bizarre seashells from Caribbean and Pacific waters, chains of tiny irridescent Hawaiian shells, or Whitby jet, or carved wood, a little brass box with crushed turquoise in the enamel lid, a walrus tusk or an ivory chessman, long separated from its fellows. And for a year or two, Luke had singled out Griselda for a gift a little different from the others.

Everybody approved. Uncle Jacob liked Luke and was always glad to see him. Hector liked Luke, and had wanted to ship with him. But Uncle Jacob, with an eye to the future and a canny awareness that the days of the sailing ship were over, had vetoed this idea. Hector had been found a job on the S.S. ABERFOYLE, a dingy little tramp vessel that he despised. Halfway through his second voyage, he left the ship in Glasgow, much to Uncle Jacob's displeasure. He was now somewhere in Canada, with the fur-traders, and they had had one letter from him, from Winnipeg, full of enthusiasm for his new life and its freedom.

Griselda thought it was, on the whole, a pity that her brother had been so rash. She missed him. If

he had stayed with the ABERFOYLE, she would have seen him occasionally. But on the whole she was very happy that year -- the year she turned eighteen.

Only Mary Belle Webster did not seem quite so friendly as she had been. Griselda was not unduly perturbed. She was accustomed to these sudden changes of regard on the part of Mary Belle, who was both entertaining and unreliable. She had sought out Griselda's friendship in the beginning, not Griselda hers. And Mary Belle was but doubtfully honest at times: she had cheated in school, she was an inveterate borrower of homework, and she cried when she lost a game. But she was very pretty with her golden curls, and the Webster house was a cheerful place...

Mary Belle...

The initial advantage had been all Griselda's. Luke, back from a trip, had distributed a collection of knick-knacks and keepsakes, forgetting no one, not even Mrs. Brickley. And the next day Griselda had been invited to Webster's. Ten minutes after her arrival the quarrel began.

Mary Belle, with her golden hair done up to celebrate her recent seventeenth birthday, was a dainty figure in pale blue ruffles. She proudly displayed a lovely inlaid jewel box, the gift of an aunt in New York. Beads

lay across the bed, pink and white coral, a chain of blue and green shells, a silver bangle. There was a chorus of admiration from the other girls present. Griselda reached out casually for the box as Mary Belle laid it down: it did not quite close, and as she lifted the lid Mary Belle with a gasp, snatched at something white within it. She missed, drew herself up, a diminutive figure of righteous indignation.

"Griselda! Your manners! Poking into my box!"

Griselda faced her, angry color rising in her dark cheeks. In her strong brown fingers she turned a round of ivory, a carved napkin ring.

"Where did you get this?" she demanded, black brows lowering.

"Luke...!" began Mary Belle. Her treble voice faltered, then gained strength. "Luke." she said flatly, blue eyes round and cold like those of an angry kitten.

"I don't believe you!" said Griselda deliberately. "That's mine -- Luke brought me four. He said last night he must have lost one and he'd look for it. You took this, Mary Belle!"

Mary Belle's delicate face paled, but she held her own.

"Are you calling me a liar, in my own bedroom, Griselda Macrae?"

"I'm calling you a thief!" returned Griselda. "You heard what Luke said, didn't you, Lily?"

The unfortunate Lily, friend to both, and naturally a truthful girl, nodded dumbly. Mary Belle was scarlet and silent, and Griselda pursued her advantage.

"I'm taking this away now -- it's mine!" She paused for a reply. There was none, and she concluded,

"I'll tell Luke where I found it!"

She turned to leave the room, tall and slim and vivid, the ivory ring clenched in her hand. Suddenly Mary Belle's defiance broke down.

"Don't tell Luke!" she implored, "Don't, don't, Griselda! Please, please don't!"

"No?"

Mary Belle ran around the bed, clung to her,

"I only did it for a joke -- I was going to give it back to you, Griselda, truly I was!"

"Then why did you keep it hidden? You're a thief!"

She stepped forward, but Mary Belle thrust her back,

"Don't tell Luke, Griselda--"

Griselda pushed her sharply aside, and the little figure collapsed on the floor, a sobbing heap of pale blue and golden curls. Lily attempted to raise her, and Griselda turned at the door to observe.

"You might as well leave her there -- she always

pretends she's hurt when she loses -- you know she does!"

And young Griselda, her dark eyes blazing, swept out of the fussy, overdecorated bedroom, down the wide stairs, out and away, the ivory ring in her hand. The few qualms she felt on the way home - it was not a long walk - passed away when she compared the ring with the other three. They were certainly a set.

To her mind, that had been the end of the incident. Mary Belle had taken what did not belong to her, had been found out, ought to be punished. However, Griselda, somewhat ashamed of herself for letting the quarrel become so undignified, decided to forego the punishing of Mary Belle, and not to tell Luke after all. It was, therefore, very disconcerting to find Luke ill at ease with her the next time they met, nervous, embarrassed, and irritable. She was about to break an uncomfortable silence by confessing to the whole incident when Luke himself brought it up.

"Griselda," he said, "don't be hard on Mary Belle -- she -- she just took that ring to tease you -- she was going to give it back."

"Did she tell you that?" demanded Griselda, her dark eyes steady.

"Yes," replied Luke. There was nothing subtle about Luke: Mary Belle had got around him somehow.

That was the beginning of the end of the understanding between Griselda and Luke. Things went all wrong afterwards. Luke was irritable, avoided Griselda, and went to Boston for some days. And gossip magnified the whole episode into something out of all proportion: Only among their own intimates, she realized later - silly girls who should have known better; fussy parents who wished to keep in with John Webster at all costs.

But Griselda felt that the whole world was against her, that malicious whispers followed her every appearance.

"DID YOU NOTICE THAT MARY BELLE WEBSTER HAS A SPRAINED ANKLE? THEY SAY GRISELDA MACRAE PUSHED HER DOWN THE STAIRS...."

".....TERRIBLE TEMPER....."

"ALL MRS. WEBSTER DID FOR THAT GIRL...."

"LUKE'S LEFT TOWN SO'S TO GET OUT OF IT...."

"WONDER WHY SHE'S SO SET ON GETTIN' HIM IN SUCH A HURRY?"

Uncle Jacob had been furious: Mary Belle Webster accepted her role of martyr with enthusiasm and played up to it. It became her blonde prettiness very well.

"I shouldn't have done it -- Griselda takes things so seriously...."

Or, "I only meant it for a joke. I'm so sorry!"

In fact she told everyone but Griselda how sorry she was. The sprained ankle lasted for some time with its accompanying little limp and charming apology,

"I'm sorry to be so slow... Oh, no -- of course she didn't! You mustn't ever say that! Griselda had nothing to do with it!"

Thus, while Griselda withdrew, proud and contemptuous and confident that she had the right of the matter, Mary Belle capitalized on the wrong. How she won Luke over, Griselda did not learn for many years. Even then the full significance of Mary Belle's tactics did not strike her.

Mary Belle had put into practise the very simple axiom that a repentant sinner is always more attractive to other people than is a righteous saint. So, she confessed to Luke that she had taken Griselda's gift. Luke was genuinely angry, and Mary Belle wept genuine tears,

"I was jealous!" she sobbed. "You always liked Griselda best, Luke! I wanted something special too -- all the others had a string of beads!"

Faced by this open declaration of Mary Belle's regard for him, Luke's anger cooled rapidly. After that he defended her to Griselda. He was flattered: he had never suspected little Mary Belle of so much feeling. And he was

disconcerted by Griselda's reception of his well-meant attempt to smooth things over. She was hard when she was angry -- silent, and scornful and uncompromising, and her dark eyes looked through him with contempt.

With heartfelt relief, Luke left the stormy atmosphere of this stay ashore behind him, and went to sea once more. Mary Belle had taken his measure quite correctly. She had, moreover (and this rankled with Griselda for forty years) taken Griselda's.

Griselda was completely and devastatingly miserable. It was not Mary Belle's treachery that hurt her most, nor even Luke's blundering incomprehension. It was the utter injustice of it all. Her uncle was cross with her; Mrs. Brickley did not hesitate to say 'I told you so!'; Luke had gone without saying good-bye; Hector was somewhere in the wilds at a trading-post. And Mary Belle, who admitted herself to be the cause of all the trouble, sat smugly in the ruins of Griselda's happiness and drank up the sympathy she did not merit.

Griselda went west to join her brother at Winnipeg. He had written enthusiastically of the west and of his prospects of advancement. Uncle Jacob did not at all relish the idea at first. Had he foreseen that within a year of her departure Griselda would be the only white woman at an

isolated trading post in the far north-west, hundreds of miles beyond Winnipeg, he would certainly have refused his consent. But he was aware that Winnipeg was a thriving centre of settlement and that a railway was under construction. Moreover an intense and brooding Griselda cast a shadow upon his household and preyed upon his nerves, and he finally assented to her departure, stipulating only that it be delayed until suitable travelling companions could be found for the long trip through American territory and by steamer down the Red River to the newest of Canadian cities.

And when the long journey was, as she thought, at an end, she discovered that Hector's plans had all been changed, and that he had left, weeks before, for an isolated post, Fort Tukikume, far north of Fort Edmonton. There, during the summer of 1886, Griselda followed him.

She made the difficult trip mostly by water, by canoe and York boat, and sometimes, as on the navigable Wakaw, transferred to a comfortable scow that was laden with supplies for the northern trading posts. She was, so far as she ever knew, the first white woman to make the journey, and it decided the whole course of her future life.

One incident of the trip seemed to foreshadow her whole life in the north. A young lad, a French half-breed, Louis Lepine, who had been with them all the way

from Winnipeg, slipped off the edge of a scow and disappeared beneath the treacherous, muddy waters. Instantly a canoe was circling over the spot, paddling around, following as nearly as possible the slow, deadly drift of the current. But the boy never came up: only, a hundred yards downstream, there floated to the surface, turning and twisting in the wake of the scow, a sodden moosehide gauntlet, gaily beaded. It rolled and twisted in the wake, and, deliberately it seemed, went under and was swallowed by the deep cold water.

Griselda, who had enjoyed watching the wake of the boats and scow, was horrified by the accident -- the suddenness of it, the cruel deliberation with which the river had cast up the empty glove, and kept the unfortunate boy. And she was shocked by the calm acceptance of her fellow-travellers. For fifteen or twenty minutes they paddled about in the canoe, seeking their comrade, then the journey was resumed. She expostulated with one of the men, a young trader going out to Fort Chipewyan.

"But -- aren't you going to look for -- the body?"

"Be no use, Water's too cold -- they don't come up here, you know. Not much chance for anyone in these rivers!"

Griselda shuddered. Was this what the north was like? A chill breath passed over her, a foreboding that she was now at the mercy of something huge and inimical that

had no regard for the individual. That feeling she was not to lose: it was often submerged for long periods, but it never passed away, and in the next ten years she knew how true a portent it was.

During the trip, too, she met Jasper Kerrigan. And two years later she married him.

The two years had made a great change in her. The sense of burning injustice under which she had left Uncle Jacob's comfortable house had cooled somewhat. She looked back on the episode almost with amusement, certainly with detachment, and wondered how she could have been so foolish. Not so foolish as to set her heart on Luke, but so foolish as to let Mary Belle gain and keep control of the situation. Two years of being the only white woman, or one of the only two white women in an area of some thousands of square miles, had quite removed any doubts Griselda might have had as to her own personal attractions and abilities. She was a handsome woman and she knew it: if her dark, ruddy coloring and snapping black eyes were not unlike those of the better looking native women, there was always the straight, jutting nose, the clean, firm, sensitive line of the mouth to supply a sufficient contrast. She was clever, she was practical, and she did not lose her head, either in emergency, or under the continued pressure of masculine admiration. Indeed she

knew well enough that the novelty of her position had much to do with the quantity of admiration she received, and that very few of the men about her were such as she would bother with under other circumstances. Jasper Kerrigan was an exception: he had been reared in a strict Ontario home and the principles of it had stayed with him. He was slim, sandy in coloring, soft-spoken and clever, and his admiration of her seemed to differ from that of the other men. They admired because she was not a native, because of the contrasts between her and the Indian and half-breed women with whom they so often consorted. But Jasper seemed to admire her for things implicit in herself. Moreover she liked him very well - as much, she told herself, as she had liked Luke.

They were married, and left Fort Tukikume. Griselda felt that the new life was an adventure. She was quite prepared to tackle the wilderness and reform it: certainly the need for reform was glaringly apparent. But she was never at any time a pioneer in the sense of accepting the disadvantages of pioneer life. Rather she was a missionary, determined to plant and foster a better way of life in the wilderness.

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Ten years of that wilderness saw her discouraged and disillusioned. Twice she suffered bitter personal grief.

She lost her first child in one of the periodical epidemics that decimated the natives in the squalid summer settlement of lodges and log huts behind the post. In 1892 her brother was drowned in a canoe accident on the treacherous Slave River. For several years the Kerrigans remained childless, and Griselda expended her stored-up energy and missionary zeal upon the natives, seeking in work an antidote for pain and bitter discontent. It did not occur to her to try to persuade Jasper to leave the north. He had his work there, and she was his wife who would stay by him.

She was naturally impatient, naturally energetic. The apathy of the natives, their lack of intellectual curiosity, their indifference to the new way of life she tried to implant was utterly discouraging. She saw the native girls she trained to keep a cabin clean and to cook, revert to savagery after a season of trapping in the woods with their own people. She saw the Indian babies that she doctored and saved one summer, dying in the epidemics of the next. An Indian child was torn to pieces by the savage sled dogs; a trapper went mad, another disappeared. The furs came in and went out by scow and river-boat, fabulous in value. Gold was discovered in the far north and people poured towards the Yukon and Alaska. The north swallowed them, destroyed some, engulfed others, returned a few.

By and large, the great volume of human effort that was exerted against the north returned few results.

Griselda, who had stubbornly set herself against the laissez-faire attitude that alone could have enabled her to exist in such circumstances in reasonable peace of mind, worked on. An intangible ideal, a faith in a far-off future, were not for her. She had to see results for her work, and results were not to be had. Instead it seemed that nature itself was against man in the north, and the mere effort to stay alive at all was so great that all else was sacrificed to it.

Griselda hardened, but did not disintegrate over those years of disillusionment. Never communicative, she did not make known to her husband the bitterness that seethed within her, and he, seeing her always busy, did not suspect the depth and violence of her growing resentment. Her second child was born in 1896, and then Griselda made her protest, solemnly and dramatically.

"If we don't leave this country, Jasper, I'm going to leave and take the baby. I can't lose him too!"

The ultimatum had cost her a struggle: she had been brought up in a Calvinistic precept that mankind was doomed to suffer. Moreover to decide between her duty to her husband and her duty to her infant had not been easy.

She was quite prepared for opposition.

But Jasper had accepted her decision quite calmly, given peaceful assent to it, and added maddeningly in conclusion,

"I been ready to leave the north for three years now, but I thought you wouldn't want to go. You've always got something doing an' you never said but what you liked it here!"

Griselda was exasperated beyond the point of words. Had the man no idea of the suffering she had been through? or of the struggle that preceded her ultimatum? Yet he made arrangements for her early departure with a celerity that indicated he already had the matter thought out, and in shorter time than she would have thought possible, she found herself established in Edmonton.

The next few years, spent between the rapidly-growing cities of Edmonton and Calgary, were pleasant ones. By 1905, when the Province of Alberta was formed, the Kerrigans had two children and were fairly prosperous. Jasper still had not settled to one thing: his experience of the west and north was such that he had had a variety of opportunities and explored most of them.

In spite of several moves and her resulting feeling of insecurity, Griselda was happy. The bitterness of the loss

of her first child had passed away. To her hard, practical mind, there was deep satisfaction in seeing the development of the little western cities. They represented man's triumph over the dreadful, disintegrating forces of the wild. In them, people progressed, kept each other in line, were responsible for themselves and for each other.

She would gladly have settled in either Calgary or Edmonton, or even in one of the little towns intermediate to these two cities. But the unpredictable Jasper was still restless, and in 1906, his wife was extremely annoyed to find herself aboard a 'mixed local' en route to a prairie homestead.

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HALF A LOAF

Indignation burned deep within her like a hidden fire in peat. She could not avoid the conflict between her duty to Jasper that bade her follow where he led, and her own innermost conviction that human beings, instead of wandering around for twenty years, should find themselves a place to live and stay there. More than anything else at that time, she wanted a settled home, not only for herself, but for the children. The same old intensity and determination surged within her as she looked at the children, kneeling on the wicker-covered seats to look out of the window of the coach. Unconscious of the wrong they

suffered in being thus torn away from their chances of an education, they were enjoying themselves heartily. Their very ignorance of what they would miss -- school, opportunity for the future, companionship of their own age, seemed pitiful to their mother. Yet on the other hand, her religion, her marriage vows, her sense of duty, and her very real affection for Jasper -- bade her accept the situation without complaint. She smouldered.

The train jerked and bumped out into the prairies, stopping occasionally at little villages of a wooden platform, one or two or three buildings. At vast intervals along this newly-completed line of track, was the start of a grain elevator. Most often the stops were mere sidings with wooden ramps and whitewashed corrals for cattle loading. Railroad ties were flung off a flat-car at intervals: several times the train shunted and backed, coupling and uncoupling cattle cars with jolts that raised puffs of aged dust from the windows of the rickety coach. And once after nearly an hour's run through a vast, grassy waste that was obviously a grazing lease, it halted to take on water from a lonely tower on stilts beside a flat, shallow, glittering lake.

They lunched in the coach out of a picnic basket. There were few passengers aboard. Far down the car a Mounted Policeman's scarlet coat made a bright spot of color. He

chatted with a brown-faced man in a broad-brimmed hat, who descended at a siding some miles out of Calgary to be met by another man driving a buckboard. Two Ukrainian women with shawls over their heads talked rapidly with gestures. The remaining half-dozen passengers were, to judge from their appearances and talk, farmers or ranch-hands.

Past the grimy windows of the coach the empty land slid by. Tiny clusters of farm buildings nestled in little valleys that were but wrinkles on the surface of the prairie, or perched on hilltops looking across infinite space. Dwarfed by the landscape, buildings looked like a child's toys, grazing animals were tiny in the distance, the few human figures infinitesimal. The passing of the train meant much to these dwellers on the prairie. They stood to watch it go by: children on horseback, bringing in the cows, a woman in her doorway, a man repairing a flimsy thread of fence -- all stopped work to gaze, absorbed.

Griselda felt a passionate sympathy with them. Of course they clung to the last glimpse of the train, welcomed its distant plume of smoke, its shrill whistle, its bumping, clanking progress. It was their link with the rest of the world -- a peopled world, now far away.

Ever the land slid by, mile upon mile, grassland and field. Pole by pole, linking the miles, the telegraph

followed. The singing wires, the humming rails, the few barbed wire fences, the winding prairie trails ... spider webs all upon the vast plains....

The train rushed past a spreading, limpid shallow lake -- a prairie slough. Its ripples glittered in the sunlight, a greenish tinge framed its edge, the battered remains of last year's tall grass and reeds dotted the surface far out from the margin. Dried cat-tails waved in the wind, swayed beneath the weight of a bird. The wedge-shaped wake of muskrat broke the placid surface, was lost in the splash of the rising of a flock of wild duck.

Puffing, clanking, the train swayed by. The ducks wheeled overhead, the muskrat dived.... Griselda knew that as tranquility returned the ducks would settle again, the muskrat resume its interrupted swim, that all would be silent save for the rustle of wind in the grasses, the varied cries of birds, the blending voices of the wild. Only the high grade of the track, the stiff file of telegraph poles, were new -- all else in this spot was as it had been for centuries.

In spite of the stuffy warmth of the coach, she shivered.

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Jasper was waiting on the platform at Maverick

for his family, and in spite of her exasperation with the whole situation Griselda was glad to see him. Difficulties so often melted before him: he never anticipated trouble as she could not help doing. His thin, tanned face beamed as he took charge of the luggage and shepherded his family down the long, echoing boardwalk that ran almost parallel with the railroad track. Along this, the main street of the town, well-kept houses on lots tidy to the exact boundary line asserted themselves among shappy tarpaper shacks with littered yards and sagging roofs. The WESTERN EMPORIUM with its high, false front exhibited a tempting miscellany of goods in the big front windows: gaudy dressing gowns, "Indian" blankets, boots and shoes, a handful of cheap bead chains. HARDY'S HARDWARE: THE FARMER'S AND RANCHER'S STORE balanced a display of nail kegs, wrenches, and horsecollars against a marvellously embossed saddle and bridle and a whole row of ten-gallon hats. Horses stamped and whinnied at the long hitching-rails, buggies and wagons rattled along the rutted road.

Their progress along the boardwalk towards the hotel and a hot meal was slow. People passing stared at the family procession, and Griselda was vaguely annoyed. The thought crossed her mind that she ought to be walking down a well-known street, where she would know most of the

passers-by, and they her. Instead, she was trailing wearily down a bumpy boardwalk in a little town, a stranger in a strange land.

Jasper nodded frequently to the men who passed and stared, calling some of them by name. Several he introduced to Griselda, always with the obvious pride in her that weakened her resentment towards him. The rotund little Catholic priest, scurrying across from his white frame church, complimented her in a strong Irish accent.

"It's bad enough that a man like yourself with a good Irish name would be a heretic, but when ye bring a lady like this to swell the ranks of the opposition...", and he indicated with a twinkle, the Protestant church across the road, "ye're adding to my difficulties immensely, Mr. Kerrigan!" He trotted on, and Jasper informed his wife that the members of the two churches lived amicably side by side, and that a fair degree of religious harmony prevailed in Maverick.

Griselda met next the banker's wife, and liked her. A gaily-dressed matron, whom Jasper introduced with preternatural gravity as Mrs. Scattleby, flashed her teeth at Griselda, and said she was pleased to meet her, adding in the same breath,

"I guess we won't be seein' so much of <u>you</u> now, Mr. Kerrigan!"

After condoling with Griselda over living so far from town, she swished away.

The town was larger and more flourishing than she had expected: she was encouraged by the fact that the homestead was only thirty miles west of it. There were two little churches, one Roman Catholic, one Protestant. At a corner where the boardwalk intersected with a narrow path, a small, greyish frame building announced itself as the bank. The path led across the tracks to the outskirts of the town where the school, a square white building with a faded green roof, was dwarfed by a new grain elevator, rusty-red and angular, a symbol of the new west.

Three or four early bluebottles hummed dizzily in the big streaky windows of the Prairie Vista Hotel. A cactus plant bristled in one window, a dusty rubber plant occupied the other. The lobby reeked of smoke and floor-oil and the red-faced shirt-sleeved individual at the tall desk in the corner greeted Jasper with loud-voiced cordiality. There was the inevitable introduction,

"...Brad Scattleby ... my wife..."

"Hope to see you in town often, Ma'am. Like you to make the acquaintance of my wife. An' don't forget we're always open for meals..."

There was the respect and admiration in his eye that she had become accustomed to in twenty years...

The big square dining-room was nearly full although it was past two o'clock in the afternoon. A waitress beckoned them to a table at the back of the room and Griselda sank thankfully upon a chair. The children chattered excitedly to their father whom they had not seen for weeks. Griselda absently watched the girls come and go from the kitchen. Each pushed the red, swinging door with foot or elbow, arms laden with plates of hot dinner, bowls of soup, pots of tea, or a huge tin tray of dirty dishes.

"What'll yuh have?"

The girl was tall, dark, untidy. A single strand of slippery black hair had escaped its moorings and dangled now between her shoulder blades. The hairpin that had held it twisted and twirled precariously as she moved.

"We got steak an' onions, liver an' onions, liver an' bacon, smoked herring, ham an' eggs..."

Their ham and eggs, pie and coffee came, served on coarse white dishes, plentiful, well-cooked. The room was full of noise, dishes rattled, voices rose and fell, chairs scraped on the floor. The red door into the kitchen flapped in and out, the glass port-hole in the top of it winked and vanished and winked. Blue smoke with a meaty smell eddied in through the door, swirled, thinned, was gone. The onions announced their presence, there was a waft of cabbage, of

fish. For a moment the bespectacled, moon face of the Chinese cook appeared at the port-hole.

Jasper ate with gusto.

"Better'n Joe 'n me can cook for ourselves," he said cheerfully. "Be nice to get a good meal again."

Griselda aroused herself to ask a question.

"How are you getting on?"

"Just fine!" replied her husband. "House all fixed up -- that is, pretty well..."

Griselda did not reply, and he changed the subject, glancing about the room.

"Busy little town, this -- sure gone ahead since I was here last year. Pretty well settled now, an' with the railway this close it'll be all settled out our way too in a couple of years -- you'll see!"

Griselda's dark eyes rested upon him in ironic speculation.

"I hope you're right," she observed.

After dinner they set out on the long drive to the homestead. The democrat rattled down the churned-up street, past the buggies, wagons, and saddle-ponies. They passed the Chinese laundryman with his barrow of bundles, his yellow-brown face gleaming with sweat as he pushed. A stolid Ruthenian woman stood in the doorway of the sectionman's low

shack on the outskirts of the town, baby in arms. Three or four little children played around the yard, chickens scratched near the threshold; a mongrel dog dashed out to yap after the democrat.

Then they were driving west on the tripled-pathed road, running straight as a ruled line between barbed-wire fences, on into the hazy distance, the sun in their eyes. The fences ended suddenly, after a mile or two, and the road became a winding trail, looping over the crests of little rises, disappearing between them. In the next twenty miles, only two houses were seen, each in its patch of plowed and fenced land, an oasis in the waste of prairies. All around, the hills, soft in outline, soft in color, merged one into the other. Unlike the prairie at Maverick, this land was not flat. It rolled gently in long, swelling curves, rippled into a scatter of little hills, low, tawny yellowish-brown under withered grass, with a hint of green on the southern slopes and in the shallow valleys. Far to the west lay the misty blue that was the wooded foothills, above it the jagged line of the Rockies.

Occasionally an early gopher, tawny like the withered grass, scuttled across the road, sat up after they passed, black nose twitching curiously. Chunky white-faced cattle grazed on some of the slopes, a few little

calves skipping about among their stolid elders. Here and there a little pile of bones, a torn and shrunken carcass bore witness to the severity of winter, the accidents of the range, mute warning that here too was slight hope for the weakling.

It was past supper-time when the democrat rattled up to the door of the new, raw-looking little three-roomed house that was but a speck hidden among the bare hills. But the chimney sent forth a cheerful thread of smoke, and a reception committee of two was on hand.

Joe Griggs, his brown little monkey face all smiles, mopped at a fresh cut on his chin. He had seen the democrat coming over the crest of a hill far to eastward: had at once laid down his armful of stovewood and scurried over to his own little shack on the other side of the fence to shave. Beside him, Dan Meade fingering stubbly chin and ragged gingery mustache, fidgeted uneasily.

Jasper Kerrigan swung his little daughter to the ground and turned to assist his wife. She had scrambled, unaided, out on the other side, and was surveying her new home dubiously.

"Well, here it is!" he said proudly. "How do you like it?"

"I guess I'd better like it," said Griselda pointedly.

But Jasper ignored her lack of enthusiasm.

"Time you've been here a couple of days, it'll seem like home to us all!" he observed cheerfully. It was his habit thus to turn the sharp edge of her displeasure by a little compliment. Griselda had long ago seen through the device, but nonetheless it succeeded in its purpose because she realized that the compliment was perfectly genuine.

He proceeded to introduce Dan Meade to her.

Dan mumbled a greeting and receded into the background, aware that he cut but a poor figure in his overalls and old cap. Griselda raked him with one comprehensive glance and placed him in a sort of mental dust-bin as something that had never been of much account and was never likely to be. The type was long familiar: he was a 'no-good'. For twenty years she had been mentally classifying those whom she met as either 'no-goods' or 'worthwhiles'. It was not hard to place Dan Meade.

Joe, having unloaded the boxes and luggage, led away the horses to the little stable well in the rear of the house. Mr. Kerrigan, laden with bags, threw open the door of the new home. It was unexpectedly cosy: the kitchen warm, the stove roaring, the kettle boiling, and a large

pot of cooked potatoes steaming on the back of the stove. Joe had prepared supper, even to slicing the bacon ready for the pan and setting the teapot to warm.

Griselda never forgot Joe's welcome. Her previous acquaintance with him was slight: she knew him for a talkative little man who told long, dull and impossible yarns. Jasper had said he had a way with horses. The two had met in Calgary, where Joe had been hauling freight, had struck up their odd friendship, and filed on adjoining quarter-sections of land. Griselda had assumed that Joe was just another bit of human flotsam. But the little man's thoughtfulness on this occasion touched her: it was a good sign for the future. Thenceforth Joe Griggs was almost a member of the family: he was neighbor, odd-job man, temporary nursemaid when the need arose. Griselda mended his shirts, knitted him socks, cooked many a meal that Joe shared, and bore with his interminable stories with a mixture of good nature and impatience depending on how busy she was at the time.

Joe stayed to help eat the supper he had prepared. Dan Meade, murmuring vague excuses about cows to be milked, went home, it must be said, unregretted. Griselda for the next few years forgot about him, unless he happened to be directly under her eye. There came a time when she took a

brief but lively interest in Dan, but that was as yet in the future.

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In the pleasant light of a sunny April morning, the homestead was not forbidding. Griselda thought the next day that the location was promising, on the edge of a cluster of little hills that lay to north and west. East and south the land sloped away in long shallow ridges over which the trail to Maverick wound, keeping to the crests and slopes and dipping only when unavoidable into the coulees with their soggy bottoms and tall, tangled grass. Spring was unmistakably in the air: a flock of crows flapped past with raucous cries, a jagged string of ducks sped into the north. Long streaks of water darkened and gleamed in the coulee bottom east of the house as the wind ruffled the glassy surface.

Walter came running in to get string for a gopher snare. He was a thin, serious-faced little boy, and his mother, who had nursed him through a bad illness two years before, bade him button his jacket. Then she enquired after Emma.

"She's out with Joe," replied the child. "Joe's telling her a story." He looked up from the snare. "Are Joe's stories true, Mother?"

"Depends what they're about," said Griselda. "You're lucky to have someone 'round to tell you stories now -- there's not much for you to do out here."

"No school," agreed her son cheerfully, and ran out again.

"Lessons every day!" said Griselda grimly, and put that dictum into effect within the week. Not for three years, not until the store and post-office were started, could the children be sent to school in Maverick. And there was no school in the vicinity until 1913.

During the summer of 1906, she insisted upon, and got a fence around the three-roomed house. It was something gained: a plot snatched from the surrounding prairie. She did her best to assert her ownership of it: planted flowers and a bush or two from cuttings she was given in Maverick, outlined flower-beds and a path with rocks. The garden represented something, if only the pushing back of the wild for a space of a few square yards.

The little house was far too small. She visualized another, a tall, white, frame house with a verandah and a neat hedge, and said as much to Jasper.

"I'll be glad when the day comes we can build. This pokey little shack..."

"It isn't a shack!" interrupted Emma indignantly. "It's a house -- it's our house!"

Jasper laughed, and Griselda looked at her daughter with some interest, forgetting to reprimand her for interrupting.

"What's the difference between a house and a shack?"

"A shack's got one room," said Emma promptly. "We've got three rooms. We've got a house!"

"A very sound argument," said her father gravely. "Now if you can only convince your Mother!"

"We've got a house!" reiterated the child. "Joe's got a shack!"

"Far as I'm concerned," replied Griselda, "a house has a brick chimney, an' a shack has a tin pipe and a stove that won't draw half the time!"

When she recalled the little argument afterwards, it seemed to typify the essential difference between her own outlook and that with which her children were growing up. They accepted the homestead for what it was: she was always trying to change it.

She did not get her house for five years. In that interval the shack acquired a fourth room, a lean-to on the south that became the kitchen and relieved somewhat the congestion within. There were even times when it was not hard for Griseldato call it a house. At other times she hated it, considering it but the current instalment of that

isolation in which so much of her life had been passed -- the isolation that she would, given the least opportunity, change and destroy.

GENESIS

In spite of Jasper's optimism regarding the certainty of immediate settlement, few neighbors arrived in the locality in the next three years.

"It must be lonely for you, Mrs. Kerrigan," remarked the Maverick postmaster, a heavy man with a face like a sheep.

"I'm not often lonely," said Griselda sedately. The words were prompted largely by her innate dislike of being pitied, but they were true enough. She had found the prairie far less lonely than the bush. A thirty-mile drive to Maverick in fine weather was something to look forward to; she had friends there who occasionally drove

out to visit her. The rest of the time was well occupied. The children had their lessons, there was the garden to plant and weed and harvest, poultry to tend, cows to milk, the daily routine of meals and household.

The isolation she had dreaded did not press heavily. Few days went by that she was not aware of others who were not members of the family. A thread of smoke to the north might be from Dan Meade's shack, or from Bill Lilly's, squatters both. Once in a while an Indian passed, slumped on his pony, or an Indian wagon with a whole family in it, coming to or from the reserve some miles to the north.

Sometimes the Indians stopped to visit or to camp overnight. Stolid and imperturbable, they sat around the little kitchen, filling it with the odor of moosehide and smoke, watching curiously the incomprehensible haste of the white woman as she went about her tasks. Griselda bore with them patiently, fed them, and aired the house thoroughly after their departure.

They were, she thought, a better type of Indian than those she had known in the northern bush, but Indians were Indians, and fundamentally all alike. She could not talk with them, or find in them admirable and romantic qualities: privately she considered them deplorably lazy

and dirty.

Jasper, however, tolerated the periodic descents of Johnny Antelope, George Tanbark, Crow-feather, and others of the tribe accompanied by various members of the families, with great good-humor. He could speak a little of their language, and he was proficient in the language of signs that is common to most of the tribes. Moreover he had business dealings with them. The Indians came every spring with loads of poplar poles and willow posts for the Grasmere Ranch, and to pay their respects to Mr. Hampton-Reid, who had known some of their great chiefs of former years. For several years, Jasper Kerrigan too, bought poles and posts from the reserve, and each spring the same scene was enacted.

As soon as the snow left the ground in spring, Jasper would begin to look for the Indians, and since they never arrived as early as he thought they should, he complained.

"'Bout time Old Johnny showed up with that load of poles! Don't want to repair the corral after spring work starts."

"You should have thought of it earlier," Griselda replied. "You know what the Indians are like better'n most people! And you could have got better posts in Maverick last fall, or any time this winter!"

But grumble as he might, Jasper continued to buy his posts and poles from the tardy Indians. The transaction appealed to his sense of the picturesque, and he could not shake off his liking for the actual business of trading with the natives.

And finally, one morning the long-expected wagon-load of poles would rattle over the crest of the trail from the direction of the Grasmere Ranch. Usually the first-comer was Johnny Antelope, who, with his fat wife, Maria, completely filled the board seat of the wagon from side to side. Johnny, blanket across his shoulders, over his leather coat, a broad-brimmed hat crowning his head, would descend slowly and ponderously from the wagon. He was a middle-aged man now, but his braided hair was as black as the crow's wing, his leathery face scarcely wrinkled. He was said to be a pure-blooded Blackfoot: his high, aquiline features and coal-black eyes, the enormous dignity that wrapped his stout figure about like a regal robe, supported his claim to a high descent. A seamed and jagged scar ran from the corner of his right eye to the nostril, a memento of the old, troubled days of the North-West, now two decades behind. Johnny Antelope had, in his youth, hunted the buffalo, and seen this staple of his people disappear, and their bleached bones carted away by the white

men. He had taken part in the forbidden tribal dances, had lived through the starvation winters of the early '80's, and had known well the great chiefs of the time of rebellion, Long Lodge, Sparrow Hawk, Heavy Shield, Piapot, and the others. Concerning his own part in the later Riel Rebellion, Johnny Antelope was reticient: there was reason to believe that he had only thrown in his lot with the white man when completely convinced that there was no chance of driving him from the north-west. And now that the last brief flare-up of independence among his people had long since cooled to ashes, Johnny Antelope sold poles to the ranchers and settlers.

Descending from his wagon, he would greet Jasper ceremoniously in sign language and in Blackfoot, and would then enter upon his business negotiations in English. His understanding of English was excellent, although he spoke it no more than was necessary. Jasper presented him with tobacco, and the two men smoked amicably together. But the poles had to be unloaded. Johnny Antelope did not help with this task: he obviously saw no need to hurry with it.

"I'll get Joe to unload them," Jasper had remarked to his wife on the first occasion that poles were bought, seeing the squaw begin the work alone. But Johnny Antelope interposed at this unnecessary expenditure of labor.

"Soon finish," he assured in his organ-deep tones. "Maria good worker!"

Stolid, unhurried, and regal, he selected a nail-keg from one of several against the barn-wall, and sat down, the smoke rising in a thin blue cloud about his head. His wise, scornful eyes watched tolerantly while Joe and Jasper assisted the industrious Maria to unload the wagon. Then they all adjourned to the kitchen for tea and lunch, and even when drinking out of his saucer, Johnny Antelope, descendant of chiefs, lost not one jot of his dignity.

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The Indians were in the vicinity every spring and summer, but there were other passers-by who came at any season. There were Mounted Police on patrol: in severe winters they travelled miles to check on the welfare of the few settlers in this sparsely-inhabited country. And there were always riders from the ranch with cattle, or Harry Wise, the ranch foreman, or, at greater intervals, Mr. Hampton-Reid, the owner.

Twice a year there was a big roundup of cattle on the lease, early in the summer for the branding, again in the fall for driving out to the foothills to winter in shelter. At intervals, small bunches of cattle were shipped from Maverick. Bawling, tossing their ugly white heads,

they jostled each other along the trail past Kerrigan's house. Stragglers attempting to snatch the odd bite of grass were rudely hustled up with their fellows by the attendant riders. At a foot-pace they passed, dust rising under their hooves, and Griselda, watched them out of sight for the pleasure of seeing something alive and moving on the still surface of the open land. They dropped into the coulee bottom, climbed up the ridge, followed along its crest for a quarter of a mile, and disappeared in the hollows to the east. Cattle and riders, silhouetted against the sky, fragments of an older west...

Early in the summer, Mr. Hampton-Reid usually called at the house with a courteous, stiffly-worded invitation for Griselda and the children to attend the branding. The first year Griselda went, but the noise and dust, the bawling of frightened animals, the odor of singeing hair and burnt flesh that followed the withdrawal of the red-hot iron with its HR brand from the fire, repelled her. She did not go again. The children went every year, and loved it. At first Griselda worried about them, for the branding scene was, to her eyes, one of utter confusion. But no one ever got hurt so far as she knew: each man knew his work, his place at a given moment. Organization there certainly was, and she became reconciled to seeing the

children jog off on horseback for at least two days of the branding.

They returned each evening, dirty, tired and excited. They had eaten flapjacks and bacon with the men in the chuck wagon: there had invariably been a dozen hair-breadth escapes. Slim, one of the cowboys, had given Emma a pair of polished steer's horns mounted on a board. Next year Mr. Hampton-Reid's nephew was coming from England to spend the summer...

The personnel of the Grasmere Ranch might regard homesteaders with resentment, but the hard feelings did not extend to the children. The polished steer's horns made an admirable hatrack near the kitchen door. And Mr. Hampton-Reid's nephew came from England and stayed several months at the ranch. He was a slim, fair, quiet boy who struck up a friendship with Walter soon after his arrival, much to the exasperation of Emma, no longer her brother's companion on long rides about the country.

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So passed two years at the homestead. The pace of life was slow and regular; time was marked off by the changing seasons, the varying cycle of occupations. There was spring work and branding and summer-fallowing and haying and harvest, all between April and September. Then there

was the hauling to Maverick, and the bringing of coal and supplies for the winter, and that might last on into the cold weather. Winter was lonely, shut-in, and long, with spells of bitter cold, mercifully broken by the warm chinooks.

February was the worst month of all: shortest in point of days, it dragged interminably at the tail of the winter. March might bring the spring. Very often it did not, but there was always the chance.

1908 stood out in the memory of settlers and ranchmen: it was the year of the crime-wave, of rustlers and bandits and mysterious comings and goings of unexplained and often disreputable individuals throughout the province. Maverick had its share of these doings, and when the police came seeking Steve Acker and Dan Meade, Griselda knew with irritation that the adventure she detested had rubbed shoulders with her, and, that she was still very far from the safety and convention of civilized living.

She had been the first to see Steve Acker, the first in the neighborhood to speak with him. He was at the front gate when she noticed him, slipping from the back of a big black horse. He left the horses standing and came up the walk, back to the morning sun, his face in shadow.

"How-do, Ma'am?" he said.

Griselda, dazzled for the moment by the sun in

her eyes, returned the greeting.

"I'm..." The man hesitated, and Griselda could see that he was looking about the kitchen, over her shoulder. He had a big, fleshy face with absurdly small features. His little eyes were close-set. Long, flat cheeks ran down to the jaw-bones, were puffed out, like a fat baby's, under his eyes. His nose was small and snubby, and his mouth smiled a continual, unmeaning smile in the corner of which glinted a gold tooth. It glinted now, as the man looked past her, into the kitchen. Then he looked at her.

"I'm lookin' for my quarter," he said smoothly as if he had found out something he wanted to know. He named a section number near Dan Meade's homestead, and Griselda assured him he would have three or four miles to go to reach it. She indicated the direction, and the man turned his head only very slightly to look, glancing back immediately, familiarly, to her face.

Resentment chilled into fear, at his next words.

"You all alone here, Ma'am?"

"No!" said Griselda boldly. The tone rang true: the man believed her. He looked doubtfully around the kitchen once more. The gun was on its rack over the wash-stand, and she dared not glance at it. She stepped back into the kitchen, crossed deliberately to the stove and looked into a pot there. Her hand closed thankfully around

the big pepper-pot: she dared not reach for the poker. If the man noted anything, he gave no sign.

Suddenly the excited voices of the children came from the stable, and the dog bounded across the yard, barking gruffly.

"Well," observed the sinister stranger, "I better be moseyin' along. So long, Ma'am. I'll be seein' you agin, I hope."

He scrambled back on his big black horse, and leading its mate, jogged slowly away to the north. Griselda sat down on the nearest chair, as near to hysterics as she had ever been in her life.

Jasper made light of the episode when she recounted it, but she noticed that either he or Joe made a point of calling in at the house several times a day when they worked in the fields, even when it was inconvenient to do so. And for some months they did not both leave at once when there was a trip, long or short, to be made.

Steve Acker did not appear at Kerrigan's again. He kept very much to himself, living with Dan Meade for the brief time he spent at Rolling Slopes, and doing nothing on his quarter. Dan turned sulky during his guest's visit, spending as much time as possible in Maverick and away from the homestead.

That was the summer that young Dick Hampton-Reid

spent on the ranch. He and Walter were delighted by the rumors of hold-ups, the rustling, the searches, and the unexpected arrival of red-coated Mounted Police at various times. And one evening he burst into Griselda's kitchen with a message of some importance.

"Uncle says to tell Mr. Kerrigan that the policeman's here and they're going to make a search tomorrow morning early, and if Mr. Kerrigan wants to come to identify his calves if they find them..."

The Grasmere Ranch had lost cattle: so had several of the settlers, including Jasper Kerrigan. Ranchers and homesteaders were for once in perfect accord.

Walter went back with Dick to spend the night at the ranch: Jasper met the search-party at daylight the next morning, and the whole posse, including the policeman, Harry Wise, Mr. Hampton-Reid, Mr. Kerrigan, and the two boys, inconspicuously in the rear, proceeded to investigate Dan Meade's manure pile, haystacks, and stable.

Dan Meade, drifter and vagabond, had been in the locality for at least ten years. He had originally come west to work on one of the big ranches in the south of the province as cowhand. Dan certainly knew the ins and outs of the cattle business on the shady side, for he had twice in the past been implicated in rustling. The second occasion

had netted him a brief prison term -- brief, because Dan was but small fry. Following his release, he went east for a year, drifting back to Maverick about the turn of the century. Like Bill Lilly, his nearest neighbor, he had squatted on the borders of the Grasmere Lease, and only when in 1904 there seemed likelihood of his being pushed out by legitimate settlement, did he file on a homestead. Dan had a few head of cattle which he ran on the open range to the east: very often they were mixed up with the Grasmere herd, and Harry Wise was chronically suspicious that Dan augmented his scanty numbers with animals from the ranch. To date, he had not been able to catch him in the act.

However, since the spring of 1908, there had been evidence of rustling in the vicinity of Maverick, as, indeed, in other parts of the province. It was a small-scale rustling, compared to that with which the American film industry was later to make the world familiar. A cow or two disappeared from a farm: a few calves from a grazing lease, a steer from a distant pasture... If, as in the case of the Happy Valley rustlers, the thief had herds of his own, the unmarked animals speedily became a part of them. The alternative, sufficiently remunerative to make it popular, was to sell the meat of the newly butchered animals to buyers who would not ask too many questions. In some localities where railroads were being laid, this

was easy. And there were too the meat-hungry Indians, many of whom did not stay within the borders of the reserves.

Dan Meade and Steve Acker were suspected of dealing with the Indians, Shortly after sunrise on the day of the search, the party invaded Dan's premises. Futile, ginger-whiskered Dan was aroused from sleep and subjected to lively questioning, and Harry Wise and the two boys were bidden to turn up the manure pile. The incriminating head, hoofs, and hide of one of the Grasmere Ranch yearlings was discovered therein, the hide bearing the telltale HR brand.

Immediately a snag arose in the smooth course of proceedings. Harry Wise knew when the animal had disappeared -- and Dan Meade had a perfect alibi for several days preceding and following that date. He had, in fact, spent them in Maverick, in the bar-room of the Prairie Vista Hotel, and he had left his saddle horse at home. It seemed that Dan was not in this instance guilty, and subsequent investigation confirmed his innocence.

"When did you last see Steve Acker?" demanded the policeman.

Dan's look of futile bewilderment deepened to something else: to one of trapped terror. Not since before he went to Maverick, he admitted. Under pressure he told a strange story of his terrorization by the mysterious Steve, who smiled, and toyed with his revolver, and suggested, still

smiling, that Dan make himself scarce for a few weeks. Dan had gone, as bidden, and, as bidden, kept his mouth shut about his unprepossessing visitor. And in his absence, Steve Acker had not been idle. He had rustled a few calves and made a deal with some Indians. He had sold his black horses, the perfectly matched pair that Griselda had seen on the day of Steve's first coming, to Andy Price, for spot cash. Price had not seen Steve since, and inquiries made of Bill Lilly, the cantankerous, bearded little squatter who lived in a tarpaper shack just within the borders of the Grasmere Lease, were equally unproductive. Bill Lilly was deaf and grumpy and suspicious, and he gave it as his opinion that Steve had good reasons for leaving the country suddenly. Bill Lilly himself was not an object of suspicion so far as rustling was concerned. He had squatted in the same spot for ten years, and so far as was known, took no interest in cattle, or in anything else. People considered him a little crazy and left him alone, and he, in turn, completely ignored his neighbors.

Steve Acker had gone as mysteriously as he came: the prairie had swallowed him up, and, since it was a year of unusual activity and many rumours, the brief chill of fear that he cast around him, was almost forgotten. Other transients came and went: would-be homesteaders spying out the land, men seeking work for a brief season, riders with

cattle, seeking range in the foothills.

Then one day, in the Maverick Post-Office, Griselda found herself looking at the police poster offering a reward for information that would lead to the arrest of Steve Acker, alias Allgood, wanted in Canada on charges of robbery and murder... It was dated some weeks previously: it had evidently followed Steve Acker closely on his arrival in the locality.

That was the last word on Steve. The earliest settlers at Rolling Slopes remembered him well enough: Griselda, whom he had frightened; Dan Meade, whose already damaged reputation suffered further by his brief association with him; Andy Price, who found himself with a stolen team of horses that had cost him three hundred and fifty dollars. His only consolation was that he had not paid the original price asked: his flesh crawled whenever he thought of his blunt refusal to meet the desperado's first-named sum of four hundred dollars.

But the Prices, even within a few weeks of their coming, seemed to have bad luck all around. They lost a good cow, probably to the rustlers. Their nearest neighbors were Dan Meade and Bill Lilly, and had included Steve Acker. Steve was mercifully gone, but the remaining two were quite hopeless as neighbors.

It was ironic that Bill Lilly should have picked one of the few real beauty spots the bare country provided for his dwelling place. He lived in the pleasantest part of the big coulee. This deep, winding depression in the rolling land had doubtless been in prehistoric times the bed of a river. It was the most interesting feature of the country thereabouts and still had a running stream at the bottom of it in rainy seasons and during the spring thaw. Further west, in the Grasmere Lease, the stream was fed by springs and never dried up. Just on the edge of the grazing land, where the road allowance of the future was staked out, the creek widened into a swampy hollow. In wet seasons, a good sized slough, in dry, a trampled and grassy expanse of little hummocks, this marsh so wasted the stream that it continued eastwards as a meagre trickle, dry by midsummer.

The eastern end of the marsh was a tangle of willow, and saskatoon, and on the dry slopes above them the grey wolf-willow, wild roses, and buckbrush flourished. Half-hidden in the willows, even when the branches were bare, completely out of sight in the season of leaf, Bill Lilly's tarpaper shack stood just above the water-line of the slough. Mosquitoes, it seemed, annoyed the hermit less than did his fellow-man. He had squatted there for some years, declining to file on a quarter of land, as his fellow-squatter, Dan Meade had done. Possibly Mr. Hampton-Reid sympathized with

Bill as a kindred spirit, a recluse, if a less civilized one. At all events, he did nothing to eject the squatter, and Bill Lilly -- Old Bill, as he soon came to be known, seemed to feel grateful for the favor. He took it upon himself to watch and repair some miles of the fence that was being built to separate ranchland from farmland, and to warn trespassers off his corner of the lease.

When the Post-Office came to Rolling Slopes, Old Bill was relieved of the necessity of riding into Maverick every month to collect and cash his remittance. The Post Office and store was less than three miles south of his shack: he did not replace his old pony when it died, but walked over for his supplies every two or three weeks. Then he retired into his shabby little hut, emerging only to make his patrol of the fences, until it was time for the next trip.

But between the Prices and the Kerrigans there existed from the beginning a tacit alliance. Both families had children, and these alone constituted a very real bond between them. The presence of the Kerrigans encouraged the Prices to remain on their lonely homestead, and their arrival bolstered Griselda's sinking faith in the possibility of ultimate settlement of Rolling Slopes.

Mrs. Price was a good-natured, uninteresting woman, usually flustered about her children and her housekeeping.

She had for Griselda an apparently boundless admiration and a genuine affection. Griselda returned the affection in lesser measure, slightly tinged with contempt. for she could not understand the other woman's inefficiency, and she was by nature an undemonstrative woman.

"I don't know what I'd do if you weren't here, Griselda," said Mrs. Price frequently. "It's such a comfort to know there's someone here to depend on!" And she would quite often continue,

"Could you let me have four or five pounds of sugar for a week or two? I forgot to order when Andy went to Maverick."

Griselda would produce the sugar without comment, while Mrs. Price prattled on, delighted over the prospect of the post-office and store.

"When do you expect to open the store? My, won't it be nice to have such a little way to go for things? I guess you'll be busy, too, Griselda, with the store and the house and the kids and all!"

"The children are going to school in Maverick," said Griselda, when this subject came up for the dozenth time, late in the summer of 1909.

Mrs. Price was astonished. "School!" she gasped. "But you've been teaching them for years, an' Walter is old

enough to be real handy 'round the place now!"

"It's time they learned something more'n I can give 'em," replied Griselda. "I don't count on them spending all their lives here!"

"Maverick! Goodness! Won't that be awful expensive, keeping two kids there all year 'round, and books an' clothes on top of that?"

Griselda was exasperated. "We've been here over three years, and there's still no chance of a school. Needs six children of school age first, and we've only got four between us..."

Mrs. Price, sensing accusation in her friend's tone, tried to justify herself.

"In two years, Jackie'll be old enough, an' Bert the year after, and here's Eileen coming along!"

"By that time, Walter'll be sixteen," retorted Griselda. "If he's going to get an education, it's got to be soon! And Emma is that lazy I can't make her learn!"

Mrs. Price was sympathetic. "Doris ain't good at school neither," she said. "She's just like me -- can't do arithmetic an' I never could! I dunno as girls should be educated -- Andy says not -- says he doesn't want a daughter getting ideas about things she's got no business in, like this vote for women stuff. Andy says a woman has enough to do with a house and children without meddling in

elections. That's the men's business."

Griselda suppressed her opinion of Mr. Price's educational theories, and made a direct and startling attack.

"Why don't you send Doris to school in Maverick too?"

"Andy--" began Mrs. Price. "Andy wouldn't like it!" she concluded timorously, feeling herself trapped between her stubborn husband and her inexorable friend. "B'sides, I can use Doris at home -- I'm busy enough as it is with the kids an' the milking an' the garden..."

"Some day," pronounced Griselda, borrowing her husband's argument, "This place is going to be all settled. And then people who can hardly read and write won't show up very well, and Doris won't thank you for not giving her a chance!"

"Andy says education is wasted on a woman!" Mrs. Price wavered visibly, then she capitulated.

"Well... You talk to Andy, Griselda! He says you're such a good manager an' all. An' maybe if Jasper said something...."

Mr. Andy Price was still of the opinion that education was wasted upon women, even after his neighbors had done their utmost. But he was vulnerable to continued pressure and a judicious application of flattery, and in the fall of 1910 Doris Price went to school in Maverick. Griselda made the arrangements.

"We're paying for Emma to live at Horricks' -- no reason why Doris shouldn't sleep with her. And you can take in butter and eggs to help pay her board."

This arrangement deprived the Kerrigans of the opportunity to pay part of Emma's board in kind, but Griselda did not begrudge the extra drain on their cash. Three children were getting an education instead of two, and that, she felt was something to throw into a scale that had for three years been heavily weighted in favor of the wilderness. In those years they had moved out to the edge of the range, settled, built the shack (house), and managed to hold their own and little more.

The expected settlement had not come: of all their neighbors, only Joe Griggs could be counted upon to throw his inconsiderable weight behind constructive effort. The Prices were followers and without initiative; Bill Lilly and Dan Meade did not count and never would. Steve Acker had been a predator, a destructive force. The ranch held aloof, Mr. Hampton-Reid distant and ironically courteous, Harry Wise openly sarcastic about homesteaders and their doings. He had a habit of turning up when things went wrong.

"Bit of frost last night, huh? O' course, us cattlemen always figgered you couldn't grow much grain here!" But when in the fall of 1909, the four local farmers,

Kerrigan, Price, Joe Griggs, and Dan Meade, had enough of a harvest to make it worth while for a steam threshing outfit to come out from Maverick to do their crops, Harry Wise was silent. The next year, he spoke once more.

"What d'ye figger she'll thresh? Only fifteen? Yeah... if you could depend on rain in July, this country might grow grain! Looks like you'll hev to go back to the ol' coffee-grinder this fall don't it?"

After this disrespectful reference to the little hand threshing mill that Jasper and Joe Griggs had set up in the fall of 1907, Harry Wise rode on, a veritable Job's comforter. In his wide-brimmed hat, he looked on foot like an animated mushroom of large size.

It had, thought Griselda, been discouraging for those first years. No settlement, no school, no neighbors worth counting. A few cattle their only source of income while the land was being broken: when they did get a crop, there were the serious problems of harvesting and hauling. But then, at last, in six months, a giant step ahead. At last they had a post-office, a store, and three children at school. Tangible progress. Griselda was not ill-pleased with the situation at the end of 1910. She noted, however, that the progress had all been made inside a few months, and thought with irritation of the three years preceding. Mentally

she dubbed them wasted, forgetting that she had enjoyed them as they came. She looked forward to the future with renewed eagerness, rested and soothed in spirit by the very years she condemning as wasted. The resentment with which she had first come to the homestead had passed in its turn: she was on better terms with Jasper than she had been for years, sharing fully for the first time, his enthusiasm for the future of this untouched land. She was not given to analyzing her own feelings, or to tracing them back to their sources, and it would have been hard for her to tell when the softening of her heart towards her husband had set in.

There was a picnic that she always remembered, out on the lease, in the summer of 1907... The empty, silent land. The ranch-house hidden by the bend in the creek, the homestead by the hills to eastward. Everywhere the rolls of the earth, the odd, rounded boulders, the deep, winding coulee, told of an age older than man. Near at hand the whitened skeleton of an animal testified to the passing of another age. But man had left no sign of his occupation upon this circle of earth, bounded by the rim of the sky. This land was empty, vast, and lonely. It frightened her: she had an impulse to call to the children to be silent, least some other power should suddenly strike..

Suddenly Jasper had said,

"Ten years! Let's say ten years from now!"

"What for?"

"We'll be going east to tell 'em about it all - - what kind of place we have here, and the crops we grow and the cattle we raise! In ten years we'll be as far ahead as lots of their places are, after a hundred years!"

Griselda was profoundly grateful to him for his optimistic vision at that precise moment. Gone was the terror and the emptiness that had oppressed her -- she could almost see the neat prairie town that was to be. With a smile, she embellished his prophecy,

"Jasper Kerrigan, the Mayor, going on a trip to his old home town!"

By 1911 Jasper's hopes seemed likely to be realized. Settlers crowded in, bachelor homesteaders of a very different type to Dan Meade, families. Elmer Jackson, with a flock of dark-eyed children and his French-Canadian wife settled near Price's farm. Olson, a Minnesota Swede, likewise with a large family, took up land south of the store, and nearby, two American families, Fred Burton and his son Henry, Oliver Harris with his family. Fred Burton remained for only two years and a half, but young Henry took over his father's land and managed both homesteads successfully.

Within a year, the need for a school had grown desperate. Griselda was active in agitating for it: indeed she welcomed the chance to do so. The question of the future of her own children was becoming pressing, and she felt

herself responsible for that forlorn newcomer, Ches Meade, into the bargain. He had no one but Dan Meade to look out for him.

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STONY GROUND

Ches, the nephew of Dan Meade, had arrived in 1912. The circumstances of his past were obscure: he had apparently been brought up in an orphanage in Ontario, and was now to share Dan's shack for an indefinite period of time.

Dan announced that his nephew was coming about a year in advance, a statement that his neighbors received with scepticism. Griselda alone thought it worth taking seriously and she cornered Dan on his next visit to the store.

"Is it true your nephew is coming to live here, Dan?"

Dan fidgeted and admitted that it was.

"How old is he?"

Dan thought the boy was eleven or twelve. "Born just after I came back west," he added inadvertently, and immediately sank into pitiful confusion. Griselda drew her own conclusions, mentally put another black mark against Dan's score, and made him add his name to the list of those who were petitioning for a school to be built. Dan, awed and uneasy, complied, although he disapproved of school taxes. Griselda seized the opportunity to deliver a lecture on the unsuitability of Dan's habits for a man who would shortly be a guardian of youth. Her victim listened meekly and promised he would try to do better in future. Griselda made a determined effort to help him do better: she was hampered by his determination to combat the demon liquor only upon its own stamping-ground -- the bar-room of the Prairie Vista Hotel -- and countered by forbidding the men of her household to transport Dan to Maverick. Certainly she cut down the number of his trips, but she could not keep him at home altogether. The only permanent result of her generalship was that Dan manifested even greater reluctance to meet her face to face.

In the spring of 1912, Ches Meade did arrive. Someone in Ontario had consigned him, like any other small parcel of freight, to Calgary: he had made the long trip on

a C.P.R. train loaded with Central European immigrants. Only the conscientiousness of over-worked trainmen had prevented him from getting lost en route: only the efforts of the Calgary police brought him into contact with his uncle, on arrival. For Dan, having travelled from Maverick to Calgary to meet Ches, had drifted into the Alberta Hotel.

Joe Griggs, mailcarrier for Rolling Slopes, brought Dan and Ches back from Maverick. Concerning Dan, he had received specific instructions before leaving the store.

"Now don't you bring Dan Meade back!" said Griselda firmly. "He's been away four days this time, and I don't see why other people should haul him back'n forth when all he does is soak in that bar-room!"

Joe looked uncomfortable. On these occasions he was torn two ways. His admiration for Griselda was enormous, and he did not for a moment question that she was quite right in her stand. But he was by nature obliging; he would have preferred to oblige both Griselda and Dan, but there was no way to do it. Moreover, it seemed certain that Dan would be waiting in Maverick to beg a ride.

Dan was. He wandered unsteadily into the Maverick Post-Office just after Joe arrived there, followed by a silent, wide-eyed boy.

The postmaster turned a long, sheep-like face towards them.

"H'lo, Dan! Lookin' for Joe here?"

"Thash what I thought," replied Dan solemnly. "Catch a ride with you, Joe?"

Joe Griggs hesitated, his crinkled little brown face a study in indecision. He stuttered with embarrassment.

"I-I-I-, er- it's like this, Dan...."

"Old lady ashk you not to, Joe?" Dan was hurt, and the soft-hearted Joe hastened to appease him.

"Well, you see, Dan...." But the harsh fact that Mrs. Kerrigan had expressly required him not to transport Dan back and forth from Maverick could not find utterance. His voice trailed off.

"Jush thought I'd ashk," said Dan with dignity only slightly marred by a hiccup. "B'sides I got m'nephew here -- Can't ashk the kid t'walk thirty milesh!"

"Oh!" said Joe with relief. "Oh, I see -- yes, yes, that's all right, Dan -- that's all right! Mrs. Kerrigan 'ud never speak to me again if I let a kid in for a walk like that. She wouldn't mind a bit, Dan, since he's along..."

Dan was proof against personal offence;

"Thash all ri', Joe," he said generously. "Jush wnted a ride home for the boyshake! What time you leavin'

t'night, Joe?"

"Not goin' t'night," said Joe. "T'morrer -- early."

"Thash all ri,' Joe," replied Dan. "Be at the Perairie Vishta, Joe -- call f'r us, Joe?"

He wobbled out, closing the door with some emphasis in Ches's face. The boy stood, looking about uncertainly.

"You better come with me," said Joe kindly, and Ches, mutely acquiescent, leaned against the wall, listening idly.

"So ol' Dan did have a nephew!"

"Seems that way." assented Joe.

"Well, well! Always thought Dan had no relations -- seems t'me he told me that one time. Mighta been mistaken though.. he did go back east 'bout 1900 after that little affair... Bag o' mail for Rolling Slopes -- few parcels from Eaton's for you folks out there."

"Any registered or special?" asked Joe.

"Nope -- less'n it's old Bill's money order as usual... Oh, here's a few posted locally -- couple for Mrs. Kerrigan. That one's about the W.C.T.U. -- my ol' woman got one just like it. An' this one here -- I dunno -- could be Mrs. Adams' handwriting... An' I gotta package for Mr. Hampton-Reid -- come from overseas addressed to Maverick.

"Must be somebuddy he don't write to often," observed Joe. "We've had our post-office at Rolling Slopes

for three years."

"Photographs..." The postmaster turned the parcel over, examining the stamps.

"Never seen stamps like that," muttered Joe. "Looks Chinese or something!"

"Not Chinese!" said the sheep-faced man authoritatively. "These Chinks in town get letters an' the stamps ain't like these."

"He gets lots of mail," murmured Joe. "Been here for more'n twenty-five years they say."

"Photographs!" repeated the other absently, rapping the flat package. "Yeah -- he's quite an old-timer, Mr. Hampton-Reid. Gets mail from all over the world -- least he usta when it all came here."

"He sure don't like the farmers comin' in."

The postmaster became aggressive. "Well -- that's progress. That's what this country needs, is progress! Ranches never got nowhere, an' now the paper says twelve-thousand immigrants arrived in Canada last week. Last week, mind you! That's what I call progress -- people comin' in an' opening up the country an' raising wheat. Look at the wheat we been shipping since this country opened up!"

"I s'pose," murmured Joe doubtfully. "Now out our way, let me see -- back in '07, or was it '06..."

"Yes!" The postmaster cut him off sharply with a

brisk return to business. "Now see here, Joe -- I'll give you this big bag in the morning, an' fix up another with this local stuff. You come 'round to the house in the morning an' I'll turn it over to you."

Thus dismissed, Joe Griggs ambled off to attend to his horses, the iron grey Percherons, Lady and Mike, that were his great pride. Ches accompanied him, the everlasting stream of Joe's anecdotes passing over his consciousness like water purling over pebbles. He was not grateful to Joe: he followed because he had been bidden to do so, and because nothing else to do occurred to him at the moment. Obediently he tagged behind, his freckled face, all round blue eyes and prominent nose, deceptively alert, his fair hair curling out around the cap that was several sizes too big and rested upon his prominent ears. He looked appealing and innocent and pathetic: he did as he was told without argument and spoke little. Joe noted the tear-stains upon the boy's cheeks and the fact that Dan was in the later stages of one of his drinking bouts, and drew his own conclusions. He was favorably impressed with Ches.

About noon the next day, Lady and Mike drew up in front of the store at Rolling Slopes. Now in 1912 there was a little store with a high, false front, boldly lettered, JASPER KERRIGAN: GROCERIES, DRY GOODS, HARDWARE. At one

side of the store a lean-to held barrels of kerosene, pails of axle-grease, and unidentified boxes, bags and buckets. Behind the store, slightly to the left, stood a neat frame house that might have been lifted bodily from some village in the Maritimes or the New England States. This was Griselda's house that only last year had replaced the 'shack' of her first five years in Rolling Slopes. It was a two-story, box-like building with windows placed two and two in mathematical precision along its visible side and end. White with a green roof and trimmings and a brick chimney, it had an air almost of prim defiance. Certainly its startling cleanliness, its neat yard and straight walk and foot-high hedge rendered the nearby buildings a sorry sight by contrast.

Near Rolling Slopes the winding, narrow trail from Maverick had become a road, straight as a ruled line, confined between posts and barbed wire. Traces of the old looping trail were still visible here and there in the fields where it was not obliterated by cultivation. Some of the fenced fields were still unbroken, their grassy acres running into the wide lease of which they had, five years previously, been a part. Others were under stubble or summerfallow, or last year's breaking, ridged with narrow furrows.

The store door banged as Joe's wagon rattled up.

"Well, Joe -- back in good time! Who's this?"

"Dan's nephew -- Ches Meade," explained Joe.

"Hm-m-m..." commented Mr. Kerrigan. He scrutinized Ches with benevolent grey eyes, and turned back to Joe.

"Got the plowshares, Joe? Andy Price has been in grouching again!"

Joe dragged out a handful of bills and papers and entered upon a complicated explanation. Mr. Kerrigan nodded from time to time.

"Well!" said a crisp female voice from behind them. "It's high time you arrived, Joe Griggs! You men can waste more time on a trip to town, and.... Is that Dan Meade?"

The question was purely rhetorical. Dan, groping about for his belongings, was in plain sight. Griselda's erect figure stiffened and her dark eyes snapped. She drew breath to speak, but her husband gestured silently towards Ches, who had dodged behind the wagon.

"Oh!" said Griselda in a softer tone. "So you're Dan's nephew?"

"'S Ches," volunteered Dan weakly. "M'nephew..."

"I see!" Her tone was pessimistic in the extreme, but her next speech, addressed to Ches, was kindly.

"Well, young man, I suppose you're hungry?"

"Yes'm."

"Come along in and get some dinner... You too, Joe-- hurry now an' get those horses away!" Her eye met that of her

husband and there seemed a brief, unspoken communication between them. "Oh... very well!" said Griselda in a resigned tones. "Dan! Hurry up, now -- I can't keep dinner on the table all day!"

She led the way down the board walk with short, energetic steps, her gingham skirts swishing. Behind her in single file followed Ches, Mr. Kerrigan, and the apologetic Dan.

Inside the white house the woodwork glittered with varnish and the floors with wax. Dinner, served at the long kitchen table, was excellent. Griselda watched Ches devour two helpings of everything from mashed potatoes to apple pie, and pity rose in her heart. She looked down the table to Dan, very much on his best behavior.

"When did your brother die? Dan."

Dan immediately had difficulty with his forkful of food: he raised it, lowered it, raised it, and finally set it down.

"Er -- oh, quite a while ago..." he mumbled.

"I suppose Ches was too young to come out here then?"

"Yes, er -- that is -- yes..."

"And no mother," murmured Griselda, looking at the orphan. He met her gaze blandly, with a singular lack of self-consciousness and embarrassment.

"Well, you'll have to do what you can for him, Dan." she concluded. Dan, as ever, looked so utterly inadequate that forebodings crept into Griselda's mind. She bade Ches keep his elbows in, and he obeyed with commendable alacrity.

"A person could do a lot with him," she reflected, and the corollary of that thought was so depressing that Dan instantly loomed as an ogre. She determined to do what she could for Ches herself, and in lieu of anything better at the moment, gave him the last wedge of pie to finish off. He devoured it with a speed that indicated that in addition to his other troubles, he was undernourished. Griselda sighed.

For his own part, Ches was quite well satisfied with the course of events. The only thing that really disturbed him was the steady, expressionless regard of Emma Kerrigan, a chunky, black-eyed, red-cheeked little girl of his own age. While she helped her mother with the serving and ate her own dinner, she watched him: when he set out with Dan for the shack, she was still watching from the step in front of the store.

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Griselda wasted no time in attempting to establish an influence for good over Ches Meade. She invited him down to play with the children, and Walter, somewhat annoyed at sixteen, at being constituted guardian to a boy of twelve,

soon found that an afternoon with Ches was not a simple affair.

He tried to explain Ches to his mother, who made frequent enquiries about the boy.

"For a little kid, he's awful -- oh, I dunno -- sharp...."

"What do you mean?" demanded Griselda.

"Oh -- I dunno -- he likes to do things without anybody seein' him, even when it's awright to do 'em. An' he's always watchin' you an' pretends he isn't..."

The explanation faltered and broke down. It had been longer than was usual with the taciturn Walter. He sat looking puzzled, and Griselda could get no more out of him than a vauge statement that Ches was always getting things all mixed up, and he, Walter, couldn't see why...

Her own interest heightened by Walter's bewilderment and by Emma's declared hostility to the newcomer, Griselda watched Ches closely. In the presence of grown-ups, he was silent, watchful, usually obedient. He was, she decided, a prying child -- he peeped into cupboards and drawers, and watched her from a distance. But that might have been natural in a boy brought up without respect to privacy of any kind.

Then one day she saw him do something disturbing. He and Walter came in for a drink and eyed hungrily the neat

rows of cookies cooling on the table.

Walter took a couple, and bade his companion do the same.

"Won't your mother be mad ?" enquired the visitor, returning the dipper to the pail.

"She don't mind, long as we don't take too many, " replied Walter. He went out, and Ches helped himself to cookies. Griselda could see him from the next room: she was shocked to see him hastily rearrange the rows of cookies to conceal the fact that any had been taken unless a deliberate count was made. Then he slipped out, closing the screen door very softly behind him.

The little incident was the first of several. Ches lied, smoothly, easily, and not always out of necessity. Griselda was in a quandary. She had fostered a friendship between Ches and Walter, convinced that it would benefit the younger boy. Instead, Walter, who had up to that time, remained out of mischief, found himself involved in one escapade after another. As the elder, he bore the brunt of the blame, and Griselda was annoyed with him for getting himself involved, when he ought to have been setting a good example to Ches. She had not yet discovered that even the slightest degree of intimacy with Ches complicated the lives of others. The knowledge of that fact was to grow slowly,

over many years. Walter, on the other hand, had discovered it already, to his own cost. But he had also found Ches interesting, and the interest outweighed the discomfort. He had not analyzed the secret of why Ches was interesting, which was very simple. Ches lived by no moral system whatsoever: he himself was his own law and order. Thus his ideas had often a refreshing novelty to Walter, who had to date lived a highly ordered life. Walter did not often go against his own scruples, but Ches had one argument that occasionally prevailed over his friend's judgment.

"Did your mother say you couldn't do it?" Or,

"Who said we weren't to do that?"

If no authority could be cited, Ches asserted that none existed. Such was the line of reasoning that led the boys to trespass upon Old Bill's corner of the lease. They had been warned against provoking the hermit, but usually in words that specified that Old Bill was the thing to avoid.

"Don't you go bothering Old Bill!"

"Stay away from Old Bill!"

Ches interpreted this warning quite literally: he probably had good reason to avoid the irascible hermit. But he suggested to Walter, when the July heat had dried up

the trickle of water in the coulee bottom south of Dan's shack, that they go swimming in the creek in the lease. They would not go near Old Bill at all: they would wait for him to go to the store first.

They did, and after a brief inspection of the hermit's shack which stood among the willows with many years' accumulation of tin cans scattered about it, they pushed on up the creek. The shack had been locked, and a peep through its dirty little barred window told them little they did not know about the owner. They found an ideal swimming pool, deliciously warmed by the sun, enjoyed their swim, and left the lease by a devious route that would, they were convinced, keep them out of sight of Old Bill.

They did not get back to the pool again for a week or two, and on this second jaunt Old Bill caught them.

They did not see him until he emerged from the bushes on the south side of the bank about fifty yards downstream. He stopped and made a movement as if to bring the rifle about. With a gasp and a gurgle, Ches floundered towards the north bank, and Walter was with him in a moment. They grabbed their clothes and fled, pausing only at the top of the coulee to scramble into their overalls. Behind them the irascible hermit shouted furiously, and, as the boys pelted off across the prairie to safety, they heard

the crack of his gun among the bushes.

They discussed the matter on the way home, and, while Ches was all for keeping quiet about it, Walter thought they should complain. He told his parents and received the reprimand he had expected for his share in the escapade. Then Mr. Kerrigan took Old Bill to task about the shooting.

When the accusation was made, the hermit seemed deafer than usual: he listened scowling until the third repetition, and promptly denied having fired his rifle at all. He admitted having seen the boys in the lease, and added that they had no business there.

"Folks oughta keep their damn' kids to home!" he concluded with a resentful glare in the direction of the offender. Jasper Kerrigan, somewhat annoyed at this turn of the conversation, reiterated that nobody needed to carry about a loaded gun all the time. For some reason, this argument enraged the hermit even more. He snarled inarticulately, and repeated his last word on the subject with one addition,

"Folks oughta keep their damn' kids to home -- kids an' wimmen -- lettin' em run 'round the country!"

Jasper peremptorily recalled him to the subject on hand, and the recluse glared at him malignantly from his little yellowish-brown eyes. The very things that rendered

his figure insignificant in the distance were striking close at hand. His grizzled beard obscured his features, his heavy brows jutted, his matted hair hung down dirty and unkempt. In his faded shirt and tattered overalls, he might have been some gnome of the hillside who had strayed into the habitation of man.

He reiterated that he had not fired at the boys, "Kid's still alive ain't he? I don't shoot to miss!" and since no harm had been done, Jasper pressed the matter no further. It had one interesting sequel. Ches Meade, when questioned about it, denied that he had been present at all, and Walter in disgust, promptly dropped him as a companion.

Griselda was secretly relieved. Both Old Bill and Ches were utter enigmas to her. She reflected with satisfaction that they would have a school within the year, and that the hand of authority would soon capture the elusive Ches and fasten him in a desk for a few hours each day to study the fundamentals of knowledge and truth. There was a possibility that some of it might stick. Not for some years did she realize that with the coming of Ches Meade to Rolling Slopes her difficulties had increased ten-fold.

MIXED RETURNS

In 1913 the long-awaited school was built, crowning the slope of a long hill in a patch of unfenced land on which the cattle still ran at large. Gone were the days of unlimited freedom for the younger generation at Rolling Slopes, and most parents (with one or two exceptions, like Mr. Price, who felt that education beyond the bare rudiments was dangerous) rejoiced. True, a school meant school taxes, loudly deplored by certain bachelor homesteaders, but on the whole, the school was a welcome addition to a growing community.

In its first year, the school had twenty-six pupils aged from five to sixteen. Fifteen of them were in Grade One. The other eleven had never had uninterrupted schooling, their standing being typified by the Jacksons,

with one year, the Olsons and Doris Price with two, Tom and Betty Harris with three, and Emma Kerrigan, who was almost up to standard, thanks to her mother's teaching and three years in Maverick.

The first teacher of Rolling Slopes School was Mr. Hackett, a tall, thin, cut-and-dried Irishman. Under his erratic guidance, the students learned but little. Mr. Hackett taught by rote, sitting up at his desk on its shallow platform, and calling up the classes one by one to recite their lessons. Behind the backs of the reciting class, their fellows did much as they liked. Once in every hour Mr. Hackett made his tour of the room, stalking like Nemesis down the aisles, peering over shoulders, lifting up copybooks to see what progress was being made. Ahead of his bony form surged a great wave of industrious activity: reading lessons were murmurously conned, fractions jotted down and reduced to least common denominator, lists of dates, imports and cities hastily committed to memory. Behind him, the unnatural industry ebbed, surreptitious games of noughts and crosses were resumed, notes written and passed, and the drowsy hum of a restless but restrained crowd of children once more filled the air.

During his tour of the room, Mr. Hackett's favorite form of minor punishment invariably fell half-a-dozen times, upon the just and the unjust alike. The bony knuckles of his

second and third fingers would catch automatically the tender lobe of an aisleward ear, administering a combined pinch and twist. For misdemeanours among the older children, he strapped frequently and painfully. Little fidgety ones were called up to his table in front of the room and bidden to sit under it for half-an-hour -- a social form of pillorying which most of them enjoyed heartily.

Mr. Hackett fitted in very well with his students' preconceived ideas of a schoolmaster: they disliked him, but there was a zest in contravening his rules, and much enjoyable competition in thinking up new forms of deviltry to harass him. By common consent, they did not tell all that went on at school in their homes, and the parents of the community, who had come from widely separated spots on the globe, had no single standard of education. Most of them were so relieved to get a school in the district at all that the eccentricities of Mr. Hackett passed without comment or criticism.

Once again, after an apparently unproductive interval, Griselda was able to see results for her efforts. Within a few months, Rolling Slopes had gained a school (which meant likewise a community center and a Sunday School), and a small, but enthusiastic Women's Club. There was as usual a fly in the ointment: Mr. Hackett was a deep disappointment to her. He was, it is true, teaching Walter two high school subjects, but he was a dead loss as a community worker.

He could not even referee a ball game; he had declined to teach Sunday School; he boarded with the Kerrigans and was extemely fussy about his meals. With dyspeptic distaste he would reject the flakiest pastry, the most appetizing dishes, and murmur with a martyred air,

"No thank you, Mrs. Kerrigan, no indeed! But if I could have another slice of bread -- a little on the stale side -- and perhaps toasted...?"

Nor had Griselda forgiven Mr. Hackett for his tacit support of Glenn Pierson on an occasion when she had returned, later than usual, from a Women's Club meeting. It had been a good meeting, well attended, and friendly. Mrs. Redding, the one woman who created difficulties, had been absent, and the afternoon passed pleasantly. Griselda got back at six, to find that Jasper had been detained in Maverick, and that the store was full of people sitting around waiting for the mail and supplies. Joe and Walter were waiting on them, and Emma had supper nearly ready. Griselda returned to the store, wondering if it would not be possible to close up, for there was every chance that Jasper would not come until the next day.

She spoke to several of the men, and paused for a word with Walter behind the counter.

"You ladies just finished your meeting?" demanded Oliver Harris.

"'bout time," said another man jokingly. "If I'd

been waiting at home for my old woman to get me supper, I'd 've given her it good!"

"well, now she's waiting for you to come an' eat!" returned Griselda, in the same spirit, "and' I'll bet that she waits ten times for your one!"

"Might be so at that," admitted the man with a grin.

"Aw, women oughta stay at home, an' lucky to have a home," said Glenn Pierson truculently. He was a loud-voiced, bullying man whom Griselda disliked: his faded, frightened little wife did not join the Club because "Glenn doesn't like it." He looked challengingly around him, insolently towards Griselda, and concluded,

"Women got no business to be gadding about all the time -- too much of that nowadays. Oughta stay home, even if you gotta keep 'em barefoot and the time -- or pregnant!"

"Oh -- hold yer trap!" Albert Horner, a bachelor homesteader from north of the store, pushed forward to the counter. "Walter, I'll take that stuff now an' come back tomorrow for the mail."

"Barefoot or pregnant!That's the way to keep 'em home!" Glenn Pierson, not to be put down, stood there grinning.

Then Mr. Hackett disgraced himself for ever in Griselda' eyes.

"Ha!" said Mr. Hackett. He did not sound particularly amused, but then he never did. After his one brief explosion, Mr. Hackett left the store. Griselda was furious,

less at Glenn Pierson than at Mr. Hackett, but she controlled her voice and spoke firmly.

"It's past closing time. I don't expect Jasper home tonight. You'd better close up, Joe -- supper's ready."

She swished out the back door and the men dispersed, Pierson grumbling loudly.

"Thinks she can lead the community 'round by the nose -- Hell, somebody oughta show her different....!"

Griselda was able to pass over the hostility of Pierson, whom she had long since dismissed as ignorant and classified in her list of 'no-goods'. But she could not forgive Mr. Hackett who had thus allied himself with the forces of barbarity.

Mr. Hackett remained quite unconscious of his crime. In fact, if he had seemed to applaud Glenn Pierson's coarse remark, it was not because he sympathized with Pierson, or resented Griselda. Mr. Hackett felt he had reason to distrust women, and was, in his Rolling Slopes period, a misogamist.

In Ontario, where he had lived and taught since leaving his native Ireland, Mr. Hackett had courted for a decade a lady of discreet age, mildy pleasing appearance, and modest means. As she was the devoted daughter of an invalid mother, Mr. Hackett waited until the latter's death to declare himself. His lady love asked for a little more

time to make up her mind. She went on a trip in the interim, and two months later she wrote to Mr. Hackett, declining his proposal with appropriate sentiments and stating that she was about to be married to the captain of a Great Lakes freighter.

Mr. Hackett, seriously chagrined, left his comfortable school and the knowing smiles of his fellow townsmen, and, like many another disappointed lover, went to the wilds.

His story was, of course, unknown at Rolling Slopes, where he was looked up an eccentric, cranky, middle-aged bachelor who existed solely to instruct the young. Had it been known, it would have gained him no more sympathy than did his dyspepsia.

At the end of the term, Mr. Hackett was not invited to remain for another year. Unregretting and unregretted he left, to be succeeded the next year by a young lady, who for the few months she remained was a satisfactory inmate of Griselda's household and a conscientious member of the Women's Institute.

The objectionable Pierson departed quite voluntarily in 1915. He had never bothered Griselda very much: his opposition was of the kind that she took for granted would arise from disreputable sub-strata that Rolling Slopes, like every other community, possessed. Bluster and ignorance

were the weapons of this opposition and Griselda did not fear them. The Piersons and the Dan Meades she knew she could deal with in short order.

But in proportion as the community grew, she discovered another type of opposition for which she was not prepared. It came from among those she had regarded as her supporters, those she unhesitatingly classed as 'worthwhile', in contrast to the 'no-goods'. There was no question of principle involved: these people like herself, looked forward to progress, upheld decency and honesty, godliness and cleanliness. But in working with them, she felt from time to time, a hidden friction, a veiled resentment for which she could find no cause. She did not realize that the cause lay partly within her: that she had little talent for putting herself in another person's place, and looking at matters through another's eyes. Her life had been spent to date, largely apart from other women, and of women she had little understanding. Men she could usually manage: they liked her, unless they had reason to feel that her dark, level gaze was critical. And with young people and children she was as a rule popular, for she spoke to them as though they were adults, a fact which overweighed the tinge of authority in her tone.

In spite of this feeling that something in her relations with others was not quite right, Griselda enjoyed

these years. She was busy, and employment was necessary to her happiness. The store prospered, and she came in for a little money under the terms of Uncle Jacob Leslie's will. Part of it she invested in the business, the rest in insurance. She thought briefly and regretfully that she had never repaid Uncle Jacob as her mother had wished, and that now it was too late. The regrets did not linger, for there was too much to think of at Rolling Slopes.

The outbreak of the war in 1914 gave her a few anxious months. Walter tried twice to enlist, but was each time rejected as unfit. He returned, very subdued, to Rolling Slopes and took up his work with the farm and the store. Others in the district, mostly bachelors like Albert Horner and Dave Wilkie, went overseas. Their going made little real difference to the community. Other families came in, and the district became closely settled. Even to the west, on the other side of the long, wedge-shaped southern tip of the rangeland, there were scattered homesteads.

Most of the time, the war seemed far-off, unreal, even impossible. Griselda had come to love the rolling land: beneath its network of roads and fences, it seemed tamer, smaller, less terrifying. Houses and farm buildings scattered over it reduced the effect of distance: the fields were varied by crop, fallow, and pasture, so that the deadly sameness of the prairie was no longer there to intimidate and depress.

Only sometimes, in the twilight, as the handiwork of man faded into the greyness, the country ceased to be a succession of fenced fields and individual farms. Then, as darkness fell, the prairie reasserted itself in its gigantic entirety. Save for the spots of light twinkling here and there, it seemed that man was not upon its vast surface: that with the coming of dusk, his discipline over the land had ceased.

Griselda's moments of doubt were few and far between, for she was busy and happy. At the bottom of her heart, she was deeply thankful that Walter was not overseas. Since her son was spared, she felt she owed something in return, and this feeling transformed itself into energetic support of Red Cross war work. Many members of the Women's Club supported her loyally: a few Germans and two or three Americans were antagonistic or indifferent. There was even a time, after three successful years, when the club was in danger of splitting over this very issue. It hung on, however, until 1917, when the entry of America into the war brought about a reversal of the attitude of the American members. In the same year, Doris Price and Emma Kerrigan were old enough to join, and Griselda began to feel that its future was assured.

It was her wont when things went awry in the club, to console herself with the thought that in the Sunday School

at least, all went well. The Sunday School had flourished since its start in 1913. Mr. Hackett had given it a brief setback by his refusal to take a class, and for a summer a man capable of dealing with the boys had been sought in vain. Henry Burton had started the class, but since joined the army. Walter Kerrigan could not keep order, and finally his father filled the breach. Jasper proved an excellent Sunday School teacher in most respects: the only one of his pupils he could really consider a failure was Ches Meade.

Ches' defection was a serious disappointment to Griselda too. She had been sure that Sunday School would help to solve the problem of Ches, whom, considering his tender years, she had been determined to rescue from the 'no-good' strata, where by environment and heredity he belonged, and transplant firmly among the worthwhiles. But her own childhood had been harsh and serious, and she had little understanding of the newer, freer youth that was growing up around her. Occasionally she noted with disapproval the frivolities that appeared to engross them: but she had absolutely no conception of the undercurrents that seethed and boiled among these juvenile minds when they were dealing only with each other. Indeed the whole chain of events leading to Ches Meade's forswearing of Sabbath School for ever was probably incomprehensible to most adult minds.

It began on a pleasant sunny May morning in 1915.

Ches almost gave up Sunday School in favor of a ramble down the coulee, when he recollected that there had been a rumor of a picnic to come. Hastily he donned his cleanest shirt, and arrived at the school well in advance of the Price's buggy, five minutes before the Kerrigan's. Having thoughtfully scrambled a few books about from desk to desk, not omitting to include his own in the mixup, he was sitting quietly in his seat when the Kerrigans entered.

Jasper took his place in the porch to ensure that the flock came indoors at once, and did not loiter to play hopscotch in the yard. Emma was not with her parents: she had spent the weekend with Doris Price, her inseparable friend. The two girls affected identical styles in dress and hair-do whenever it was possible: on this occasion, the big ribbon bow tying up a loop of braids at the nape of the neck was far more becoming to the rosy-cheeked Emma than the thin-faced Doris.

Mrs. Kerrigan, with a frown at her daughter, turned to test the organ, pumping smartly on one pedal at a time and listening critically to be sure that no wandering field mouse had established quarters within. Under cover of the organ, the girls resumed their surreptitious attacks on Ches. Usually they tolerated him with superior scorn, but today they were furious. Ches was mildly surprised.

"They're still mad about yesterday," he thought, "Girls are funny...!"

He was quite right when he assigned the reason for Emma's and Dori's un-Sunday-like mood to the events of the preceding day.

Price's homestead lay two miles east and a mile south of Dan's, and the farm buildings stood a short distance back from the edge of the big coulee. Ches, left to his own devices during Dan's absence, had made himself a generous lunch of bread and hard-boiled eggs, and set out to spend the Saturday afternoon down the coulee. Coming opposite Price's farm, he was attracted by the sound of laughter and shouting in the yard.

The younger Prices had been joined in their game by their older sister and her bosom friend, Emma Kerrigan. At the moment they were engaged in that classic favorite, King of the Castle.

"I'm the King of the Castle!" chanted Jackie Price.

"An' you're the dirty rascal!" as he repelled the attackers, running one at a time from below to dislodge him.

Jackie's eminence was the top of the old manure pile, the accumulation of seven years, outside the wide doors of the Price stable and cowbarn. Only on the stable side, where it abutted on the rapidly-growing new manure-pile, did it partake of the traditional nature of dung-heaps. On the other three sides, the old manure pile was dry, sun-baked,

and leached into an inoffensive blackish mound, dry and scattered at the base, sufficiently high in the middle to make it an ideal site for King of the Castle.

Normally Emma and Doris would have despised this particularly childish game played in such deplorable surroundings. But it was summer, and they were bored. They joined in with zest, their superiority in age and weight offset by the awkward length of their skirts, well below the knee.

Ches's appearance at the top of the coulee was hailed with glee by the little boys with whom he allied himself as a matter of course.

"I'm the King of the Castle,
An' you're the dirty rascal!"

Ches gained the peak of the old manure pile almost at once. Then the girls, most unfairly, combined to storm the castle. Ches sidestepped the rush, and, unable to stop herself in time, the lighter Doris went flying down the slope to land in the 'new' manure pile. Solid Emma, a trifle in the rear, tried to stop, stumbled, and rolled down, on top of her friend. It was unfortunate that, at that precise moment, Pete, the Price's hired man, should have thrown out of the barn a generous forkful. Atempting to rise, the bemired damsels got the full benefit of this new shower. It did not turn their attention from the original sinner.

"He pushed me! Ches pushed me!" sobbed Doris.

"You did it on purpose!" raged Emma, shaking out the skirts of her dress. It was her new dress: she had been permitted to take it on this weekend visit on the understanding that she wore it only to Sunday School.

"Well, Well! Well!" was Pete's verbal contribution to the argument. He then wisely withdrew, feeling no doubt that one scapegoat was sufficient.

The scapegoat likewise withdrew, and with his allies, Jackie and Bert, got a ride to the store with Mr. Price who did not take a serious view of the episode. At the store, they told all with some glee, being of the one opinion that for the girls to make such a fuss about a little manure was absurd.

Thus Mrs. Kerrigan, knowing her daughter's vanity about clothes, was not surprised to see Emma at Sunday School in her everyday school dress. Ches, who had already dismissed the episode from his mind, was innocently surprised at the hostility of his schoolmates.

Into this seething cauldron of juvenile emotion, the Sunday School teachers hopefully poured the day's lesson. So far as Doris and Emma were concerned, the hour of religious instruction but left them the more embittered. Ready and willing to impart to their elders the information that Ches was the viper in the bosom, they found no ear inclined their way. Instead, they received cold looks and an acid

rebuke from Mrs. Kerrigan for whispering.

Tom Harris and Ches, sitting together, exchanged a secret and gratified glance when Mr. Kerrigan got up and opened the window. They were firmly convinced that had he done so any earlier his wife would have closed it again. For Jasper Kerrigan, model husband, pioneer, storekeeper, postmaster, and community leader, chewed tobacco. Quietly and unassumingly, never objectionably. Nevertheless the ends of his lovely white silvery mustache were faintly yellowed. Griselda, whom most of her neighbors wrongly suspected of ruling Jasper with a rod of iron, deplored the habit, never more so than on Sunday School mornings. Jasper did not take his chew to church with him, for the Lord exacted his attendance at Church, and Jasper was a sincerely religious man. But so far as he was concerned, Sunday School was purely voluntary and he chewed surreptitiously at Sunday School. But as standard Alberta school equipment was never known to include a cuspidor, the open window was a necessity. Griselda sighed as the sash slid up.

Jasper assigned the memory verses for the next week.

"..... WHAT THINGS SOEVER YE DESIRE, WHEN YE PRAY BELIEVE THAT YE RECEIVE THEM, AND YE SHALL HAVE THEM..."

He finished the verses and embarked upon a paraphrase, turning occasionally to the open window. Outside

in the schoolyard a meadowlark fluted shrilly: the pleasant draught from the open window caused the dust particles to dance in the sunbeams slanting in from the high ventilators at the other side of the room. Inside the room one person at least was struggling with a new thought, and for the first time in his short life, seriously applying his mind to religion.

Ches wanted a pony of his own. He wanted to break it himself, train it, and name it. Dan had long ago promised him his own horse, but the actual presentation was deferred on the excuse that he should wait until he was bigger and then get a good animal. To this proposal Ches was quite agreeable, but now he was nearly fourteen.

WHATSOEVER THINGS YE DESIRE... BELIEVE...AND YE SHALL HAVE THEM...

It sounded all right. Ches was shy of broaching the subject in class but he waylaid Mr. Kerrigan afterwards.

"Does that mean...anything?"

The storekeeper, a little touched by this sign of interest in a far from promising quarter, was reassuring. He wondered what idea the boy had and was both cautious and hopeful.

"Well...Yes, I guess it might, Ches. Anything that it's right an' proper for us to have, an' doesn't hurt other people. Of course we have to do our best to get it for

ourselves an' work for what we want too..."

Ches thought the matter over as he jogged home on swaybacked old Doc, and it was on his mind while he soberly settled down to clean the shack that afternoon. Then he went out to the barn and selected a corner for a single stall. His was, after a devious fashion, a one-track mind. Upon it ideas which did not coincide with his own made small impression. But, so far as he could see, his desire for his own pony was all right with Mr. Kerrigan, in spite of the fact that the latter knew nothing about it. It seemed moreover to find support in Holy Writ, which hitherto had been quite incomprehensible to Ches, sliding off the surface of his mind without making the least impression.

Ches put in a month's attendance at school and Sunday School and in July got himself a job. Griselda was pleasantly surprised, feeling that at last Ches was getting some sense.

That summer the great struggle in Europe was well under way. A few homesteads at Rolling Slopes lay idle, or were farmed by renters, including those of big Dave Wilkie, the long-jawed Yorkshireman, and Albert Horner, whose little house, a mile north of Dan Meade's shack, had never been finished. Albert's reunion with his Maude had taken place in England, in wartime, and not in Canada, as they had planned three years before. The Grasmere Ranch was short-handed, and

farmers talked of a possible shortage of farm labor.

The summer passed, a good year with July moisture. The grain waved on the slopes of the little hills, the low land slough bottoms were rank with coarse grass, the roadsides green knee high. The season was the homesteader's dream come true, and Jasper reminded his wife of his prophecy, years before,

"In ten years we'll go east.... Remember how I always said this country 'ud fill up. They said it wouldn't grow grain, an' look at it!"

He paused for a moment.

"When the railway comes through here..."

But the railway was not to come for another ten years, and in the meantime the grain was hauled to Maverick (where the number of grain elevators had grown to four). Sixty miles by wagon was the round trip, and the loaded, creaking wagons lumbered up the little hills, down the slopes, heavy with grain to be sent overseas to feed nations at war. The return trip, unless made with a load of the winter's coal, was less slow: the empty wagon bumped and rattled over the winding trail, for there was still unfenced, unoccupied land between Rolling Slopes and Maverick.

In the sharp, clear autumn air the grassy range was tawny and russet and the wild-rose bushes a ruddy flame where frost had touched but not yet withered them. Empty

fields were golden with stubble or dotted with stooks awaiting late threshing. Straw-stacks stood out against the blue sky. Occasionally the prairie chicken whirred away from the road. Wild ducks passed quacking and the hoarse cawing of the crows disturbed the calm.

Ches Meade hauled grain that fall like many another boy of his age. He had worked for nearly four months for Bennett, a prosperous farmer. His wages amounted to more than enough to buy the pony. He drove Bennett to Maverick to board the train for Calgary, and entrusted the man with the important commission of buying the pony. Then Ches himself would go up in a week or two and ride it back.

But Dan Meade, his own harvest completed, went to Calgary that same week. The two men met, and Bennett, carelessly or unwittingly, passed the job of negotiating for the pony over to Dan. And that was the end of the matter for that year. Dan was apologetic when he sobered up, almost pitifully contrite. Bit by bit he paid the money back. But Ches never forgave him, and never called him 'Uncle' again.

He stopped going to Sunday School too, and when questioned by Mrs. Kerrigan, was sullen and impertinent. Griselda was disappointed: she had sincerely hoped that at last the problem of Ches Meade was solved, between school, Sunday School, and a good job over the summer.

But Ches was henceforth impervious to Sunday School and openly scornful of those who attended. He continued to go to school however for another year and a half, and, as the biggest boy in the class, provided a problem to tax the ingenuity and patience of any teacher.

COMMUNITY

By 1916, the Rolling Slopes schoolhouse had lost its look of pristine newness: the green roof was fading in the sun, and two cracks had appeared in one of the high ventilators. The three ash-piles in the yard were of fair size, and the fence showed traces of depredations on the part of the rangeland cattle. This school, like many of its kind, scattered across the prairies, was beginning to look a little tired, a little apologetic.

And well it might. At the moment it no longer represented to the community the blessings and privileges of free education for their young. It was instead a storm centre, the knotty core of a serious problem. As Oliver

Harris, the chairman of the School Board, had just remarked, it was "a damned nuisance."

Unusual for mid-July, a buggy and horse and two saddle ponies were standing outside the school. In the doorway of the inoffensive little building, the Board was holding a meeting. Two of its members had had a rendezvous on the spot to look over the school property: the third had chanced to pass by.

"'Tain't a school -- it's a gol-darned matrimonial agency!" said Oliver Harris morosely. He scratched a match down his overalled leg. "Dratted girls...!"

"Miss Pringle was a good teacher," said Jasper Kerrigan reprovingly. "An' so was Miss Amesworth. 'Course Miss Herrick couldn't keep order, but she was a real nice little thing. I did think that Miss Black mighta stayed for another term, but..."

He glanced down at the letter in his hand which informed the board that their fourth teacher in the last two years was resigning.

"Must be the war!" he murmured sadly.

The third member, Olaf Olson, ever slow of speech, said nothing, although his companions paused to give him opportunity to express his opinion upon the subject of matrimony versus school-teaching. Olaf had eight children and his keen interest in both sides of the matter was taken

for granted.

"Well," summed up Jasper Kerrigan, "she's gone!"

His gaze and those of his fellows wandered out to the horizon, as if following the form of the lost Miss Black into the tender blue haze.

"We'd better start lookin' around," said Oliver Harris glumly. "It's your turn, Jasper. I got the last one."

Jasper silently recalled the last-minute plea of his wife.

"Now, Jasper, do try an' hold out for somebody that'll be company for me, seeing as how I'll have to board her! I get so sick of those silly young girls! An' someone with a good stiff hand over those young-uns -- that Ches Meade!.."

"Wish we could get a man!" he murmured, knowing what the response would be.

"Iss no men!" Olaf, with a family of girls, was already anticipating a labor shortage at harvest time.

"Aw -- you're crazy, man! There's a war on!"

Jasper shifted his chew of tobacco.

"Well -- how about an older woman, or a married one?"

"Oughta be at home takin' care of their families!" said Oliver Harris, who had decide views on female suffrage.

"There's married women that's good teachers an' got husbands at the front an' no family," said Jasper.

"Yah!"

"By golly, that's so! Put an ad in the Calgary paper, Jasper! An' next one of us to go to town can look around."

The matter thus settled, the Board meeting passed on to other things.

Rolling Slopes awaited the reopening of school with some interest. The casualty rate among unmarried female teachers had to date been one hundred percent, and public opinion deplored the fact that matrimony, an admirable institution, contributed so lavishly to the filling of the classroom rather than to improving the quantity of instruction available therein.

Mrs. MacGillis, who had been Miss Tweedie for thirty-eight years and Mrs. MacGillis for three, arrived at Rolling Slopes in September. She was sturdy, Scottish, energetic and able, and under her hand education thrived as never before and seldom afterwards at Rolling Slopes.

At the time of Mrs. MacGillis's arrival, Griselda was beginning to feel her self-imposed community duties weighing a little heavily upon her. She was the accepted leader in such matters, and she was beginning to wish she

had a dependable helper. She had lived apart too long to make friends of her own age: her interests lay more among the younger people, and she welcomed the arrival of Mrs. MacGillis with high hopes. Three months later she thought with surprise that that had been the warmest moment of their acquaintance. For acquaintance it remained, never developing into friendship in spite of the many likenesses between them and their respect for each other. Like two circles, they could touch only at one point -- the community. Here and here alone, Griselda and Mrs. MacGillis were in perfect agreement. The war work thrived that year in spite of the apathy of many club members. And Mrs. MacGillis was a most admirable teacher.

The school girls learned to sew, knit, and crochet. Mrs. MacGillis gave some of them, who possessed a parlor organ at home, music lessons. She taught in the Sunday School, and in the year and a half of her stay, she instilled the habit of industry into a number of her pupils.

It looked for a time as if she might even make something of Ches Meade. Warnings about him, she had received in plenty before he put in a belated appearance at school. Mrs. MacGillis listened until she caught the drift of the conversation, and then put an end to it bluntly.

"That may be very true," she said drily, "but ye will have to let me make up my mind for myself!"

When Ches appeared at school, she disciplined him within an inch of his life. Only his hope of taking an important part in the Christmas Concert kept him at school after his first day with Mrs. MacGillis.

In Western Canadian rural schools, the Christmas Concert was far more than a neat rounding-off of the school term. It was the hall-mark of the teacher's ability, the measuring stick by which the community gauged the quality of the instruction imparted. Every one went to the annual concert in his own district and to as many others as time and distance permitted. Then the performances were carefully compared as to quality and quantity, and the teachers ranked in their order of merit.

Mrs. MacGillis, a veteran teacher with a fund of experience to draw from, entered this contest well equipped. She had, moreover, thirty-five pupils of well-assorted ages to work with.

In the middle of November, she planned her concert. By judicious use of that stage device known as tableau, she was able to get her whole school on the stage at once in six items: four songs and two tableaux. Every child in the school thus appeared in at least eight items: no mean feat in itself. The first tableau was religious, the second patriotic -- a nice balance of the two themes prevalent in the public mind at that period.

Play-books were eagerly passed around from hand to hand and the parts copied out. Words to the songs and carols were written on the blackboard at recess by Mrs. MacGillis, or by willing helpers whose handwritings were decipherable. It is only just to add that there were, by the middle of November, more of the latter in the school by far than there had been at the beginning of September. Recitations were assigned, all the way from six-year old Oscar Olson's

> When I was a little boy, just so high
> My mother used to spank me and make me cry!
> Now I'm a big boy, Mother doesn't do it--
> Daddy takes the broomstick and goes right to it!

to his big sister's placid rendering of

> 'Twas the night before Christmas and all through
> the house.....

with one slight improvement of the poet's wording in the forty-third line.

Having successfully squelched Ches, she meditated upon her victory and appraised it for what it was worth. After the middle of November Ches found himself in a new position -- almost that of deputy to Mrs. MacGillis. The reserve of mutual distrust broke down between them, and he improvised and shifted stage fittings and impromptu scenery, heard the stumbling rehearsals of the younger children, came early and stayed late. He revealed a latent mechanical talent and considerable ability in acting. For two nights

while the north wind wailed and whistled in the tin stove-pipe and Dan tossed and snored on his cot, Ches worked late, memorizing his own lengthy parts in the program. About two o'clock he blew out the dim flame of the coaloil lamp and went to bed, stiff, tired, and word-perfect in his parts.

The improved state of affairs lasted for six weeks and Mrs. MacGillis began to wonder if she had solved the problem of Ches Meade.

The day of the concert arrived, dull and cold and bleak. A few sad snowflakes shivered down, dancing uncertainly in the chilly wind that moaned in the eaves of the little school and stirred the paper decorations before the cracked ventilator. Inside the building the class were adding the last touches to the decorations.

"Suppose it blizzards? It's awful dark outside!" Laura Olson draped a long red streamer across the window and Doris Price carefully tacked it down with a cluster of cardboard holly leaves at each end.

"Oh, I hope not!" said Doris anxiously. "What'll we do if it storms?"

The corners of fat Oscar Olson's mouth turned down at the notion, but his round blue eyes grew cheerful again as the big boys scoffed at the possibility.

"Who cares about a little snow?" muttered Tom Harris.

"Maybe it'll clear by eight o'clock. Dan said it wouldn't storm today." Ches descended from his perch on the cloakroom partitions where he had been stringing a green-and-red paper chain to best advantage.

Mrs. MacGillis, supervising the practice of a drill on the little platform at the front, while Emma Kerrigan played the organ, reflected that it should be as good a concert as any to found elsewhere.

By eight o'clock the stars glittered overhead, twinkled dully towards the horizon, and the wind had dropped. Sounds made several miles away could be distinctly heard.... the gruff bark of Olson's big dog... the creaking and groaning of a wooden gate in the ranch corral... A horse whinnied shrilly in a field to the left. Griselda, sitting in the back of the sleigh, looked out over the prairie, stretching away into infinity. The horizon was invisible, the land was vast, but not dead, no longer lonely. Lights twinkled out there to the south, to the east: they drove between the fences that represented man's dominion over the earth.

"Cold?" asked Jasper.

"No."

It was not the cold that troubled her: she hardly felt it through the thick robes. Nor was it any sense of being impotent against the stern wilderness. It was simply and solely -- Emma.

Emma, who should have been sitting with her mother in the sleigh, was not there. She was coming later -- driving over with Henry Burton, who was home on leave from the Army, who had been to the Kerrigans to supper a few nights before.

Griselda was perturbed. Emma was still at school, for Mrs. MacGillis taught ten grades among her thirty-five students. Emma was, however, seventeen, and for the first time, that fact stood out clearly to her mother, who had hitherto seen her as a schoolgirl, a little daughter who would one day be grown up, but not yet.

Behind them the bells of the cutter jingled merrily. Joe, who was driving at the moment, pulled over, and Henry and Emma swept by with a shout, a peal of laughter. The heavy sleigh dragged through a drift that the cutter had floated over, and Walter commented unfeelingly,

"Just as well Emma went with Henry! We'd stick for sure with her holding down the back of the sleigh!"

Jasper and Joe laughed. Emma's weight was a standing family joke. But Griselda frowned in the dark, annoyed that they should jest about the child who had just loomed as her mother's major worry.

Griselda was ambitious for Emma. She had once dreamed of seeing Walter in a profession, but the years had crept by, the difficulties of education had been too great,

and the business needed him. She was reconciled to Walter's future lying in Rolling Slopes. But for Emma she had planned ahead. Money was not scarce now, and with another year of high school Emma would be able to start specialized training. Griselda favored Normal School for her daughter. Emma herself thought she would like a business course: her father thought she would look well in a nurse's uniform if she was going to work at all. His whole attitude was lukewarm on the question of Emma's leaving home. Griselda knew quite well that when Emma made up her mind, her father would support her solidly.

She remembered her own years of isolation after her marriage, and resolved anew that Emma would see something of the world before she married.

"She is not going to get married too young! I won't have her stuck out on a farm for life before she's twenty!"

The sleigh stopped before the school and they all got out. Mrs. MacGillis bore a box of necessaries for the concert, Griselda carried in her pail of sandwiches, Jasper brought the lamps, and Joe fetched up the rear with the copper washboiler for the coffee.

Ches Meade, making up the fire, greeted them politely. The schoolroom was in darkness for a moment or

two, save for the ruddy glow from the coals. The lamps when lit revealed the sparkling tree squeezed in beside the organ, the red and green paper decorations, and Henry Burton and Emma talking decorously at the front of the stage. The girl spoke to Mrs. MacGillis and then turned away to arrange her music on the organ. Henry's brown face was bland and good-natured as ever: he met Griselda's eye without confusion and greeted her respectfully. Griselda was short with him. But her brooding was quickly interrupted.

Sleighs were arriving outside: voices called back and forth. Mrs. Olson entered, surrounded by her children, all rosy from the cold air. She spent a busy few minutes straightening rumpled sleeves and skirts and combing the flowing golden manes of her flock. Upon these gala occasions, the little girls appeared with their blonde hair loose and flowing, tied back with stiff little pink and blue bows, the envy of all their schoolmates with plain braids, or dark, lank locks.

The Harrises came next, and Tom, scrubbed and polished till highlights glinted from his hair, his face, and his new boots, creaked importantly up to Ches to confer upon some item of stage management. Then both boys, extremely conscious of their own importance, vanished behind the stage curtain. Younger members of the school had perforce to sit,

wriggling with excitement, in their appointed places on the front benches, and wait there until bidden to go behind the scenes.

Griselda looked at her grey flannelette bed-sheets that had for three years served as stage curtains. Half her mind made a mental note that the Women's Institute might be asked to contribute a set of stage curtains for school and community use. The other half observed with irritation that Henry Burton was being very active in helping Mrs. MacGillis and Emma move the organ.

In the cloakroom, the audience congregated, talking and laughing, seemingly reluctant to enter the school. Lunches were unpacked; Jasper Kerrigan set the big washboiler of coffee on top of the heater, and Griselda measured out the coffee and tied it in a sugar sack. All around, the chatter rose and fell.

"....does seem too bad. I've been thinking maybe the Red Cross group should send some more parcels overseas..."

"....three pairs of socks knitted I'll bring down."

"....an' I said to her, 'Gloria', I said, 'You're cuttin' off your nose to spite your face, that's what..!"

"....braied up tight and <u>vet</u>. When iss dry, I comb it oudt... Iss real pretty and curly then..."

"....sit in those little narrow seats? It can't be done!"

"....smell that hair oil of his half-a-mile down the road!"

"....kids said the Dragon has a face just like Kaiser Bill -- mustaches and all! I sure want to see it!"

The few strangers present were recent arrivals in neighboring communities. The Prescotts, who had settled west of the lease during the summer, were present with their sixteen-year old daughter, Mabel. She was a peach-tinted blonde, whose long, dark-green, rabbit-lined coat set off to perfection her exquisite coloring, her slightly vapid beauty. Well aware of the fact, she did not for some time remove the coat, but unbuttoned it so that her slim white neck and golden crown of hair rose dazzlingly from the dark cloth, the furry softness.

At a quarter to nine the chairman of the school board mounted the edge of the platform in front of the curtain. Behind him, waves and billows in the grey flannelette of Mrs. Kerrigan's sheets indicated intense activity upon the stage. Progress from front to back of the crowded school was now impossible, since boards were laid along the seats, crossing the aisles to make extra accommodation. A row of young lads from outside the district perched on the cloakroom partition at the back, and men stood in the doorways and along the windows at the side of the room.

Simultaneously with Mr. Harris's first word, a baby at the back burst into loud wails. Undiscouraged, the

chairman raised a voice that could, under normal weather conditions, be heard for a quarter of a mile all aroung him, and proceeded to welcome his neighbors and all strangers present to the entertainment.

"... an' we're glad to see so many here tonight an' hope you'll all enjoy... Ough!"

Mr. Harris descended abruptly from the edge of the stage rubbing his ribs. A bench moved behind the grey sheets had caught him neatly: he stepped back undaunted and concluded his speech at a pitch that easily quelled the subdued ripple of laughter raised by his abrupt descent. Then, as he stepped down, the curtain drew back, disclosing the whole school upon the stage for O Canada. The program was under way.

Carols there were in plenty, and the Manger Scene as a tableau. The Three Kings of Orient were splendidly garbed in bright blankets and snowy turbans. The shepherds, with a little help from behind the scenes, rendered their carol, "While Shepherds Watched their Flocks", and then stood back uncomfortably close to the organ to make room for the other comers. The angels, glittering in cheesecloth and tinsel, wobbled on their bench along the back of the stage, and among them Griselda could see little Eileen Price - Eileen Fay, who was now eight. Most of the angels came from the lower grades of the school and the bench was necessary to give them appropriate height.

The tableau was followed by a recitation of some length, concerning the troubles of a pair of twins.

"And when I died, the neighbors came
And buried Brother John!"

The reciter, whose efforts had been obscured by noises from behind the curtain, the shuffle of feet, the scraping of furniture, all punctuated by "sh-h-h!" in a sibilant whisper at intervals, stepped down with a relief shared by the audience.

"And now," announced Mr. Harris, "We have the pleasure of seeing a play -- The Time Machine, presented by the senior pupils."

The curtain drew jerkily back to reveal a tea-party, sipping and rocking and gossiping. Laura Olson, serene and plump, her long fair hair done up in a neat bun, beamed over her tea-cup. Her long plaid skirt, lapping over several inches at the waist band, and her billowy lace blouse obviously belonged to her mother's wardrobe, and a pince-nez sat oddly upon her freckled snub nose. Theresa Jackson's long dark plaits were crossed over her head, and she peered over the edges of steel-rimmed glasses with a witch-like air of intentness perfectly in keeping with her role of a small-town busybody. Doris Price, the third member of the trio, be-plumed, be-jewelled, with a fine fur neckpiece and muff, obviously represented a lady of rank and fashion.

Uon this restful scene, to the intense delight of

the Grade I and II row, there came Ches Meade. Ridiculously long and thin in rusty black, he wore an ancient top hat and carried a malacca cane. With elegant precision of accent, and deferential little bows, he informed the three tea drinkers that he had overheard their wishes to be once more young, and would carry them back to their childhood if they so wished. But they were sceptical: she of the pince-nez surveyed him with scorn and commented audibly and disparagingly upon his offer. He would not be discouraged.

"Ladies," he implored, "try it for yourselves... no charge. Only try it, and you will see!"

Finally she of the nodding ostrich plumes condescended to try the Time Machine : she swished elegantly across the stage, and at the entrance to the Time Machine (which looked very like a clothes-cupboard with an enormous dial upon the door) she expressed aloud her wish to be once more the happy little Lady Henrietta Eugenia de Montmorenci, playing on the lawns of her ancestral castle. The door of the Time Machine closed creakily behind her: the hands of the door were adjusted by the Professor to ten: he pulled a lever. Behind the scenes arose an ominous clanking and rattling, and fine hollow groans (contributed by Tom Harris). Then the door of the Time Machine flew open, and out on the stage there catapulted a grimy, pig-tailed little urchin, who scrambled to her feet and demanded,

"Say, what do youse think youse doin'? I'll tell my paw what you done to me, sure as my name's Katie Klanigan..!"

A shriek of delight burst from the front row. Several of them turned around to see if their elders were enjoying the performance too. The audience's response was entirely satisfactory, and when, at the end, the Professor, the worker of magic, allowed himself to be shut in the time machine while the vindictive ladies whirled the dial hands back to zero twice over, and nothing whatsoever emerged from the box when it was opened, the applause was loud and genuine.

Towards eleven o'clock, the concert drew to a close. The final carol rang out with less enthusiasm than the first: the last recitation lagged a little. St. George and the Dragon appeared in their tableau, and the resemblance between the Dragon and the Kaiser could not be denied.

With the ending of the last item, there was a jingle of sleigh bells outside the windows, then at the door. A slightly cracked falsetto voice was raised in the cloakrrom.

"Merry Christmas!..."

"Santa Claus! The weary front row revived, began to push and squirm until quieted by Mrs. MacGillis' stern look. When she turned away to draw the hamper of gifts out from under the tree, several of the bolder little boys seated themselves on the edge of the platform as near to the tree as they could get. Ches and Tom, exchanging knowing looks,

drew back a little so as not to seem to believe in this hoary superstition.

"Jackson's sleigh bells?" muttered Tom as the good saint made his appearance, pushed forward by willing hands, and shaking a string of bells that ought by rights to have remained with the reindeer.

Ches nodded. He was eyeing Santa Claus sharply, a covert grin on his sharp face.

One would have said that the good Saint had lost weight since he was fitted for his scarlet suit. It hung oddly on his narrow, slope-shouldered figure, and was belted in closely around a paunchy middle with a wide, shiny, patent-leather belt that had somehow been broken or cut at one time, and was now joined with a bit of amateur lacing at the back.

Keeping one hand at his whiskers, Santa Claus began to talk, groping in the hamper with his free hand.

"Well, well! Have you all been good children this year, boys and girls? Now, let's see -- who's this nice present for? Anna...Anna Olson!"

A twitter of voices broke out, and Anna, blushing deeply, came forward.

"Well, well...! So this is Anna!"

The parcel changed hands, and Anna wriggled back to her mates.

"Now here's one for a little boy...Maurice Jackson ...!"

Under cover of the hubbub, Ches whispered to Tom, "What's he keep his hand up like that for?"

"Guess the beards goin' to come unstuck or something!"

Tom was right. Not only the beard, but the whole mask was in danger of falling off and revealing to naive youthful believers in Santa Claus the leathery little monkey face of Joe Griggs, mail-carrier and part-time odd-job man and clerk around the store. At the moment, Joe, inspired by the fear of exposure, was making an excellent job of Santa Claus, and the contents of the hamper dwindled fast.

"Tom Harris!"

Tom returned with his package and both boys bent over its contents. A sturdy pocket knife, with a fine variety of blades, and a corkscrew and a small screwdriver embedded in its solid frame...Ches was so engrossed that he nearly missed his own name.

"Ches Meade!"

But the soft, flat package proved to be mittens, substantial grey woollen ones. Ches needed a pair badly, as Griselda's sharp eyes had noted, and these fitted well. Nevertheless, his spirits fell a little.

Santa Claus came to the bottom of the hamper, and, still holding on to his whiskers, began to grope about ~~in the~~

in the boughs of the laden tree. Most of the adults present had put a parcel, or several parcels on the tree. The children were not the only ones to receive.

"Emma Kerrigan!"

The long flat box, when Emma opened it, held a pair of pale-blue kid gloves. Griselda snorted when her daughter held them out for inspection.

"Fine thing to wear here, miles from nowhere! I thought Henry had more sense!"

Emma looked hurt, but Griselda hardened her heart.

"Mabel Prescott!"

Mabel, thus introduced by name to her new neighbors for the first time, moved languidly forward. Her abundant fair hair and brilliant coloring received glances and audible comments of approval from most of the men. The women were not quite so sure.

"Now there's a good-lookin' gal for you, Walter!" said Jasper to his son, who blushed furiously.

"She don't hurt herself to move quickly!" murmured Griselda at the opposite side of the room. For some reason, Mabel had brought Mary Belle Webster to her mind.

Santa Claus, nearly at the end of his task, fumbled around in pursuit of several small, elusive parcels, disentangling meanwhile his whiskers from the wiry spruce boughs. Ches, on the pretext of helping him, drew near, and hidden

from the audience, gave a sly tug at the shoelace that held together the two halves of the wide patent-leather belt at the back. The knot loosened -- the halves of the belt, slowly, inexorably, began to part. Ches handed the last of the parcels to Joe, who thanked him effusively and, in his role of Santa, promised to remember him next year. Ches withdrew to a safe distance, and began working his way towards the source of supply of the lunch that the ladies in the cloakroom were preparing to serve.

Then it happened. The over-taxed belt gave way, and Santa's misfit costume parted in the middle. The brilliant ticking of a fat pillow came into view -- the rusty brown pin-stripe of Joe Grigg's best suit. Joe, in horror, clutched at the slipping red-flannel trousers with both hands, and the mask slid from its moorings and dangled rakishly under his left ear. A moment's silence...a burst of laughter ... an irrepressible Indian whoop from Tom Harris. Ches echoed the whoop with variations of his own, and added in his high tenor voice,

"Oh-h-....Joe-e-e-e....!"

The unfortunate Joe glanced wildly around. He had no idea of how he had come to be in such a predicament, and suspected it was his own fault and that he had forever let down the dignity of the Christmas saint. On inspiration, he spoke suddenly in his own mild, flat voice, rendered a little

shrill by excitement.

"Well, folks, guess you all seen what happened. You see, it was this way...."

It was the invariable beginning of Joe's fantastic yarns: "You see, it was this way...."

"...Santa Claus, he's a little behind schedule, you see. An' so he says to me, 'Joe', he says, 'I gotta couple of calls to make at a--a--an orphanage in...er--in Chicago, an' a-a children's hospital in England, an' here I am good an' late already an' this concert of yours ain't over till eleven o'clock. Now, Joe,' he says, 'you're an old friend of mine, an' I want to ask you a favor..."

He paused, but the attention of his audience was assured.

"'Joe,' he says, 'will you wear these old duds o' mine an' take my place at Rolling Slopes tonight? I'd like to be there an' I don't want to disappoint nobody, but those kids are pretty lucky -- they got their fathers an' mothers an' their own homes, an' plenty to eat. I wanta go myself to that orphanage an' that hospital where the kids are pretty lonely an' sick an' unhappy.' So-o..." concluded Joe grandly, "I told Santa Clause that I'd be real glad to do him a favor an' wear his old duds, even if they don't fit so good's they might, cause I knew none o' the kids in <u>this</u> school'd mind."

The conclusion of Joe's most successful fantasy was nearly lost in a burst of laughter and applause, and Joe scrambled out of the scarlet costume and hung it on the organ. Smiling sheepishly, he pushed his way to the back of the room where Griselda pressed upon him a brimming cup of coffee and her hearty congratulations.

Ches Meade, taken aback by the swing of public sentiment in favor of Joe, helped himself to a double portion of an airy layer-cake and squeezed into a spot near the cloakroom door where he could help himself from every plate that was passed out. In spite of the failure of his joke on Joe, his disappointment over the mittens, he was at this moment perfectly happy.

On the other side of the partition, Griselda, pouring coffee, was not enjoying herself. Usually this kind of gathering, with the whole community, young and old, present, and everybody in holiday mood, delighted her. Tonight her personal affairs weighed heavily upon her: she could scarcely be polite to Henry Burton. He seemed, moreover, to go out of his way to be very polite to her.

"Turning the girl's silly head!" thought Griselda crossly, noting Emma's obvious pride in her uniformed escort.

The Prescotts, the newcomers from the other side of the lease, came up and were introduced. Mrs. Prescott

and her married daughter were tall, blonde, handsome women: the sixteen-year old Mabel was quite as pretty at close quarters as she had appeared at a distance. A flicker of expression crossed her blue eyes as Henry and Emma approached, and Griselda promptly made introductions with a shadowy hope forming in her mind. She invited the Prescotts to dinner the next Sunday, extended the invitation to Henry Burton, and hoped that his enthusiastic acceptance might not be entirely on account of Emma.

.....

Once lunch was over, some of the families with small children left. Mrs. Olson, having tied on numerous scarves and seen to it that her flock all had their own overshoes, picked up her roly-poly youngest.

"Laura! Vhere iss the cake-pan and the cream jar? Nefer mind the box - - ve leave it. ...Vhere iss Oscar?"

"Oscar!"

"Oscar!" echoed the little sisters, to whom their only brother's wanderings were a source of constant vexation. Oscar was finally located at the front of the room, searching for a piece of brown paper to wrap up his bright tin train, and dragged protesting to the door, where his father waited with the sleigh.

The Jacksons went, and others with many miles to drive. Inside the school willing hands lifted the planks

and piled up the desks at the sides of the room. On the platform a hastily-assembled orchestra grouped itself and began tuning up.

"Want to stay for the dance?" demanded Jasper. The question was purely routine: Griselda usually stayed for a couple of hours at least, for she still enjoyed dancing. But tonight she had no heart for it, and, to her husband's surprise, demanded to be taken home. Mrs. MacGillis likewise elected to leave, and only Walter and Joe Griggs remained, to come home later with Emma and Henry.

As she waited near the door, Griselda looked back into the schoolroom with a curious sense of being alone. She was going home without her children. They were within the group beyond the partition and she was leaving them there. A square dance set formed up as she watched: Henry and Emma, the married Prescott girl and her husband, Doris Price and a strange man. The fourth couple joined them after a minute or two: Walter, and Mabel Prescott.

Joe Griggs, perched on a bench, began to call.

"Honor your partner
Corners address...
All join hands an' circle to the left..."

Outside the door the sleigh bells jingled. Griselda climbed in, pulled the heavy robes over her knees, very conscious that she had come without Emma, that she was leaving without Emma, and that Emma was seventeen.

OUT OF HAND

The Christmas Concert of 1916 remained in Griselda's mind as the end of a comfortable period of tangible achievement on which she later looked back with regret that it had not lasted. For the next two or three years her complacency suffered and her carefully devised plans went subtly awry.

She had, the night of the concert, invited the Prescotts to dinner during the Christmas holiday. They were admirable people who would obviously be an addition of the right kind to the community. Griselda set herself to draw Mrs. Prescott out, and within an hour was possessed of the whole family history. They were Ontario people who had

settled in their youth in Manitoba, where the girls had been born and gone to school. Then the eldest daughter had married and her husband decided to homestead in Alberta. The older couple had moved to be near them.

Griselda was genuinely surprised at the carefree manner in which the other woman related her momentous decision.

"Didn't you mind leaving your home?" she asked curiously.

"Yes," admitted Mrs. Prescott. "I did -- we had a nice place, only two miles from town. But I don't now -- it's worth it, to be near the girls, that is, Isabel at least. And maybe Mabel won't go far when she marries."

"I don't suppose she'll be long," said Griselda politely. She liked Mabel the least of this family. But if Mabel could catch the attention of Henry Burton at this moment, Griselda would glady bear with her...

Mrs. Prescott's mind seemed to be travelling the same path.

"That's a nice young fellow you have here today!" she remarked. "I suppose he and your daughter...?"

"Oh, no!" said Griselda hastily. "We've known him for years -- he's a family friend. And she's far too young. We want her to finish school and go to Normal School before she thinks of settling down."

Mrs. Prescott smiled. "I wouldn't be too sure! she said. "I thought Isabel was going to train for a nurse-- and look at her now -- not twenty and two years married!"

A burst of laughter came from the kitchen, where the young people were playing games. Griselda was uneasy, and when she went out there half an hour later and discovered the round game split up into couples, she felt as if she had been slapped with a wet towel. Emma and Henry were playing chequers by the window, and Walter and Mabel Prescott were talking in low tones over a long string of dominoes.

A whole new field of possibilities opened up in Griselda's mind and she reproached herself for her blindness. Not to have seen that Walter might find Mabel's blonde beauty appealing! Anxious to discover if any damage had done, she queried her children later.

"How did you like Mabel?"

Walter was silent, which might have meant much or little. But Emma replied frankly,

"She's nice, I guess. She doesn't say much. Henry says she's dull."

There was nothing to be done about Walter's silence, but Griselda punished her daughter for her unwelcome speech.

"When does Henry go back to camp?" she enquired coldly.

Emma wilted immediately.

"Wednesday," she replied, and Griselda reflected with satisfaction that this problem at least was settled. By the time he got back, Emma would be safely away and would have forgotten all about him.

But Henry Burton never went overseas. He contracted gun-deafness at Petewawa and was discharged from the army within a few months. Three weeks after his return, Emma announced that they were engaged. Jasper Kerrigan was pleased, Griselda bitterly disappointed. She could not hide her feeling from Emma.

"Seems to me we've wasted a lot of time and trouble on educating you, when you're going to get married like this!"

Emma had developed a new and irritating poise. It was impossible to ruffle her now, and her impervious good humor at this point prevented a serious rupture between the two.

"Oh," she said lightly, "I can't be bothered, putting all my time on other people's kids! I'm not like you, Mother, always fussing over other people and the school and the club and the church. If I'd been you, I'd have thought Daddy was the most important thing in my life!"

Griselda looked at her sharply, but there was no reason to suspect criticism in the remark. It had been made as a statement of fact: they were different in outlook and purpose, and Emma was stating it in her own words.

"All I want," concluded Emma, "is my own home. Other people can do as they like -- I'm not interested!"

"All right," said Griselda shortly. "I guess you know what you want!"

The words, as ever when she was deeply moved, were ungracious. Emma seemed to feel them as such, for the rosy tan deepened on her round cheeks. But she said no more, and her mother too was silent, her thoughts weaving in and out ...Memories, plans, emotions... She had been reluctant to settle here, because of the children... The children had elected to spend the rest of their lives here. She had worked long and hard to establish at Rolling Slopes the school, the Sunday School, the Ladies Aid, the club... Emma dismissed them lightly: "fussing over other people". Yet this much had been accomplished: Emma's children would not know what it was to grow up without proper schooling would not run wild on the unfenced prairie...

I don't suppose they'll appreciate it, either! mused Griselda. Seems to me the only ones who do, are the ones who go to all the trouble, and these young ones we do it for don't thank us! Unbidden the thought crept in that this same younger generation who lightly dismissed the work and worry of their elders, had much in common with the apathetic Indians of the north, who took what was given them, accepted what was done for them, and returned no thanks, showed no

results...

Aloud she said,

"Time you get half-a-dozen kids running around, you'll be glad to do a little work towards keeping up the school and the Sunday School, my girl!"

"Mother!" Emma was crimson with indignation, and her mother concluded with a flicker of amusement,

"You're getting married, aren't you? Got to take everything into consideration, don't you? No wedding till you turn eighteen!"

The status quo was restored: once more they were mother and daughter, and Emma with her dark head bent over her sewing had ceased to be the Voice of an apathetic and unimproved society. Yet as the months passed, Griselda's disappointment did not lessen. Emma had succumbed so easily, had so soon been absorbed at the general level of the district. She would be one of the farmers' wives, was delighted at the prospect of being just that and no more. Even if she had taken a year away from the district and then come back to marry Henry Burton, it would have mended matters. Griselda had no objection to Henry as a son-in-law. But she had counted upon Emma as an ally for the future, perhaps upon handing over the leadership of community work to Emma at some distant time. It would have been to an Emma whose superior education rendered her suitable. Little Emma Kerrigan who had grown up and married at Rolling Slopes would

not be capable of such leadership, would not have the prestige to carry it off. Griselda had had that prestige: she was older than most of the women coming in; she had been there longer; as the storekeeper's wife, she had influence; she was not tied down to her home by the care of small children. She had had -- still had -- every advantage to enable her to take the lead in Rolling Slopes.

But she was not getting any younger, and the amount of work to be done in the community was increasing. She was thankful for Mrs. MacGillis, thankful that no problems of emotion, either like or dislike, colored their sensible working partnership.

Mrs. MacGillis herself early in the year, had had trouble at the school. Ches Meade, once the Christmas Concert was over, ceased to take an interest in education. But, having nothing better to do, he continued to come to school, apparently with the sole intention of disturbing the peace. He was sufficiently clever that she had difficulty in identifying him as the disruptive element, the setter of the fashion of a new epidemic of profanity, the inspiration for the mischief of the little boys. Mrs. MacGillis thought the situation over and decided that Ches must go. His love of the limelight, of the applause he did not merit was ingrained: he had no intention of working for the attention he craved.

In January, Ches was expelled from Rolling Slopes School. A majority of the school-board favored the decision, Olaf Olson with an approving grunt, Mr. Harris with an emphatic

"By golly! That's the stuff -- should've done it long ago. Boy's no good!

Jasper Kerrigan agreed that it was up to the teacher in such matters, and probably Ches would be the better for a job. Ches himself, the centre of attention for some days, was proud of his achievement: he was an object of interest to a number of people, and an object of awe to his former schoolmates.

Several people, including Mrs. Kerrigan, spoke to Dan about Ches. They implied, more or less openly, that if anybody really needed an education, it was his nephew, considering his natural handicaps. And Dan, after the third conversation (if conversation is the right term to describe an interview in which one person does nearly all the talking and the other the greater part of the listening) found himself a little irritated by the whole matter. The impulse to go and see the teacher himself crossed his foggy mind as he came jogging down the road on his old pony one day, and saw that the children were just out of school.

The February chinook had cleared the land of snow for a couple of days, and the air was of April warmth. Just

fifteen minutes previously the bell to dismiss the children had rung, and orderly files had marched to the cloakroom doors, there to break and scatter noisily. A minute or two of clatter in the cloakroom, a stampede to the door, a constant hubbub in the yard as horses (saddled in readiness at recess) were mounted, and buggies hitched up. Small brothers and sisters, struggling crimson-faced with scarves and overshoes, were exhorted to make haste, and Mrs. MacGillis herself bundled the little ones into their garments and inspected them to be sure everyone had his own mittens. With a startling whoop and clatter of hoofs, Tom Harris and his friends were off, out of the gate and away. A minute later, wheels rattling on the frozen earth, the buggies bowled away down the hill.

For nearly half a mile, almost to the gate leading out of the lease land on to the road, the mad race continued. Then, their feeling of freedom restored, the children sobered down, split into two groups, and went their ways, north or south. Once out of the lease they were all too likely to come under the watchful eye of parents who disapproved of buggy races, wheel to wheel, in which contestants aimed to edge each other out of the trail, somewhat in the fashion of BEN HUR'S chariot race, or of horse-racing with flying lariats swinging. So these excitements were restricted to the larger freedom of the rangeland whose kindly slopes

and hollows concealed so much, whose only discordant feature was the schoolhouse, perched aloft on the hill, fenced in by barbed wire.

Dan Meade, jogging along the trail, met the noisy crowd. The children were instantly curious, and those in the lead slowed down to wait for the others. Chattering and speculating, the group went on together.

"Betcha Old Dan's goin' to see the teacher."

"Betcha he's goin' to make her take Ches back!"

"Aw... Ches don't wanta come back!"

"I hope he doesn't come back!" said Laura Olson. She tossed her head and her thick fair plaits, fastened at the end with a serviceable shoelace, glinted the white-gold of ripe barley in the sun.

"Aw...just because he usta dip your braids in the inkwell...!"

"He's mean...!"

"We ain't had nearly so much fun since Ches quit."

"He didn't quit -- he was expelled!"

"I bet Ol' Dan makes Mrs. MacGillis take Ches back!"

"Well, I bet he doesn't!"

They lingered a moment or two at the gate, but as there was no sign of Dan's immediate return, the group dispersed.

Dan Meade reached the schoolyard, which he was wont to enter twice a year, on the occasions of the Christmas Concert and the closing picnic. He dismounted, and leading his gaunt, shabby old horse, approached the schoolhouse door. Just as he raised a hand to knock, the door flew open and a sturdy arm in a polka-dotted sleeve waved a duster under his nose. There were a couple of vigorous snaps, the air for several feet around filled rapidly with chalk dust, and Dan sneezed tremendously. Mrs. MacGillis pushed the door wide open and stood squarely on the step, stolid, uncompromising. Her steel-rimmed spectacles glinted purposefully beneath a stiffly-rolled brown pompadour, and under her gimlet eye Dan immediately regretted the impulse that had led him to this interview. But it was too late to withdraw.

"Ye wanted to see me about Ches?" said Mrs. MacGillis authoritatively.

Dan, looking helplessly to left and right, and finding no succour, mumbled that he had just been passing and...

"I won't have Ches back in the school!" said Mrs. MacGillis as her visitor came to an uneasy stop. "He's no interest in learning."

She paused to give Dan a chance to reply, but he stood there, bedraggled and drooping to the last gingery hair in his lank mustache, and said not a word. Mrs. MacGillis

began to realize how unworthy of her steel was this opponent.

It's worse than mischief!" she continued accusingly. "He won't learn anything! And he's an idler and a bad influence on the younger children. What that boy needs is a job where he'll be supervised and kept out of mischief and made to finish his work."

Dan was still wordless, and Mrs. MacGillis concluded grandly,

"I'm responsible for seeing that these children learn something and form good habits. And Cheshas to go. Good-afternoon, Mr. Meade!"

The door closed emphatically, and Dan found himself staring at the inhospitable wood. Hastily, with furtive looks behind him, he mounted, and the moth-eaten pony shambled off, urged to a stumbling canter once he passed the gate. Dan was in more of a mental turmoil than his feeble powers of concentration could stand. He recalled fragments of the lop-sided conversation and shook his head.

"What a wumman!" he muttered, with something very like consternation in his watery blue eyes. He really had not intended to protest Ches's expulsion from school: he was not sufficiently interested to do that. Moreover Ches himself didn't mind the new state of affairs too much. Dan regretted the vagrant impulse that had led him up the school trail.

Henceforth he regarded Ches with commiseration when school was mentioned, and mumbled to himself and to those who would listen,

"What a wumman!"

Ches idled about the store, his gangling presence an affront to both Mrs. MacGillis and Griselda. The teacher observed with irritation his utter lack of any feeling of guilt: he might, to judge from his own attitude, have been graduated cum laude. His expulsion had deepened Griselda's sense of failure. She had, for several years, planned an ambitious future for her own children, and the rescue of Ches Meade from the morass of Dan's influence. Nothing, she felt, had been accomplished.

She made one more effort on Ches's behalf. If education had failed to benefit the boy, there still remained work. There was no opening for Ches around Rolling Slopes and his friendship with a drifting German-American named Conrad Busch seemed likely to lead him into trouble. Busch, who claimed to be a cousin of a German farmer living on the other side of the lease, had been around Rolling Slopes all winter. He worked here and there, stayed with a German family in the neighborhood, and hunted coyotes with a pack of four, lean, long-legged hounds.

Conrad was pro-German and made his sympathies very evident by scoffing openly at the farm lads who spoke

of joining the army when they were eighteen. Ches himself had an idea of joining up.

"What d'ye want to join up for?" said Conrad derisively. "'Tain't your business who gets killed -- where does that get 'em?"

"Aw.-- you're an American..." began Ches, and Conrad laughed.

"That's right. I'm an American -- they can't take me!"

"Henry's an American," said Mr. Kerrigan.

"He's back here, ain't he? An' I'm here -- what's the diff?"

It was plain that Conrad was no good influence on Ches Meade, and when Griselda met Mr. Hampton-Reid in Maverick one day, and he mentioned that the ranch was short-handed, she thought she saw opportunity to dispose of Ches with advantage to all around. She told the rancher the situation and he listened with attention.

"I've heard of this Conrad Busch... I can't promise anything, Mrs. Kerrigan, but I'll see what I can do."

A week or two later Ches and Conrad went hunting on the Grasmere Lease and put up a coyote not far from the ranch. The intended victim led the hounds down the creek bed and through the corrals, where they promptly got into

a fight with the ranch dogs while the wily coyote skimmed into safety over the lease. Harry Wise, attempting to disentangle the dogs, was bitten, and Mr. Hampton-Reid came upon the scene just as his infuriated foreman was threatening to shoot the intruding hounds. With some difficulty he restored peace all around, and mindful of his promise to Griselda, invited Ches and Conrad in to warm up.

The results of this interview were two. Conrad Busch left Rolling Slopes hurriedly, his departure accelerated by the Mounted Police, who had, it was said, acted upon a hint from Mr. Hampton-Reid. And Ches Meade got a job at the ranch.

He had expected the work to mean "cow-punching" in its most romanticized form. It was disappointing to find himself carrying wood and water for Lee, the Chinese cook, cleaning out stables, filling water troughs, milking a cow. In other words, he was but a farm-hand on a ranch, the lowest of the low. Harry Wise supervised him with an all-seeing eye: his sharp voice rasped across Ches's daydreams like a cross-cut saw. It soon palled on Ches: the will to work was not there. He attempted to score off Harry Wise and the grumbling old Chinaman, Lee Wong, by practical jokes which failed miserably. By April he was back, loafing around the store.

Griselda decided that it was no use to bother further with Ches. Environment and Heredity had placed him among the 'no-goods', and there he was not only content, but determined to remain.

A CALF DEPARTS

The next March, that of 1918, ushered in the fourth wartime spring. In those four years had come to the prairie communities an increased consciousness of the great struggle. Two or three young men from nearby settlements had been killed, and Robert Wallace, whose land lay just north and east of Dan Meade's would never return. Early in 1918 that quarter and the one adjoining it on the east were taken up by Engvald Nordstaad, a big, hard-working Norwegian, who had come to Canada by way of the Dakotas. He was joined that summer by his wife, Minna, and their son, Eric, was born in the middle of a bitter cold spell in December.

The Norstaads had kept to themselves a good deal, perhaps because Minna's English was still very broken. But

after the bitter night when Griselda was awakened at one in the morning by Nordstaad's persistent and imperative knocking on the front door, and galvanized into wakefulness by his urgent request,

"Could Mrs. Kerrigan come to Minna? The baby..."

the Norwegian family rapidly became part of the community, liked and respected.

Griselda was more conscious of the war than ever before. Albert Horner and Dave Wilkie were still away, and men were still joining up. The great explosion that had devastated the port of Halifax in 1917 had come very near destroying members of her own family. Her sister Jean had escaped by the merest of accidents: Uncle Jacob's old house was gone: all the old street was flattened... Griselda could not quite take it all in. She had not seen Jean for thirty years. Still less could she imagine Mary Belle Webster -- no, it was Herron -- dead. Spoilt, petted, dainty, petite Mary Belle with her golden hair and her gay, tinkling voice, had died dreadfully, under the tons of brick and stone and plaster that had been the old Webster house with high, pillared doorway and broad staircase. The thought sickened Griselda. Mary Belle was still so clear to her -- clearer than Jean, or gentle Lily, who had also survived the tragedy.

She could not think of Mary Belle as a grown woman, the mother of two children: a son who was lost at sea in 1915, a daughter who had married in Boston. Mary Belle's children were older than her own, might have been her own... She, Griselda, might have died there in the crash and flame that had overwhelmed hundreds.. if she had stayed, if she had married Luke. How would Luke get on without Mary Belle? Without his son?

Griselda mused over the tragedy during the year which followed it. She recollected the life she had left thirty years before, all that had happened since then, all that was happening now. Gladly she turned from these depressing thoughts when they intruded, to Rolling Slopes where the spring came on as usual. Something of a labor shortage threatened, and Jasper employed Ches Meade for a few days work around the farm. Ches hinted that he himself had always yearned to work in the store, but Jasper was adamant:

"Any time a clerk's needed here, I've got five--my wife, Emma, Walter, Joe, and me. It's a farm hand I want, Ches."

So, while Joe nursed a poisoned hand, Ches worked around the farm with Walter, preparing for spring work. Griselda was unusually busy with the preparation of Emma's

trousseau and household goods, four men to cook for, and the school teacher to board.

Mrs. MacGillis, Ches's old antagonist, had resigned the Christmas before. Her husband was being invalided home and Mrs. MacGillis had been offered a school in the city. Rolling Slopes school was taken over by Miss Mamie Treight.

On a Saturday morning, the Kerrigans were at breakfast. The long kitchen table was well supplied with food, and around it sat in order Mr. Kerrigan, Walter, Joe, Ches, Miss Treight, Emma, and Griselda.

The day was bright and sunny, and Mr. Kerrigan opined that spring had come to stay. The lanky Walter concurred in this opinion, Ches likewise. Griselda, less optimistic, set a laden platter of hot cakes on the table and reminded the company of other springs that had seen the snow falling at the end of April.

"I don't trust the weather!" she concluded briskly, and Joe Griggs, her staunch admirer, supported her theme.

"Well, now -- back in New Hampshire in 1904 -- yeah, 1904 -- we had an ice-storm..."

"Aw - put a sock in it, Joe!" advised Ches rudely.

"Help yourself to hot-cakes, Joe!" interrupted Mrs. Kerrigan. "Mamie, you're not eating! Shall I make you some toast?"

"No thank you," replied the boarder. Her round blue eyes seemed about to fill with tears: her babyish mouth drooped sadly. She excused herself and, plump shoulders sagging, went back to her room to write to Sergeant Wesley Stone of a Southern Alberta regiment. She had not heard from him for two mails and her imagination was working overtime.

Griselda shook her head. "It does beat me how that girl ever came to take up teaching! Walter, you've got to pen up the red calf! It's into everything -- it started chewing on the blankets I was airing on the line yesterday."

"Can't!" said Walter, who had charge of the cattle around the farm. "It's been sick -- I want to watch it for a day or two."

"Give it some salt -- it'll be all right!" said his mother briskly. Her husband and son exchanged looks of tolerant amusement.

"I dunno what ails the critter," complained Mr. Kerrigan.

"Give it some of that dope you soak Joe's hand in," advised Ches frivolously.

"'S bad enough," mused Mr. Kerrigan, "to have Mamie mopin' around this place without the calves gettin' sick!"

"Now Jasper!" said his wife, but her mouth twitched as the boys snickered. She knew how her men folk felt.

Mamie was a very poor exchange for Mrs. MacGillis, that was certain. Her heart was not in her teaching, and life in the country she could not bear. A school two miles from the boarding house, out in the bare range land, had for her all the terrors of the jungle. The range cattle were enclosed in fences, but the wire was so thin, their horns so long... So Mamie was driven to school each day by one of the Kerrigans, for she was afraid of horses and declined to try riding or driving.

Breakfast over, the men went out to the yard, and Griselda called up the stairs,

"Mamie! There's hot water here if you want to wash out that lace."

The last scallop on the lace had been finished the day before in school. Mamie looked at it now with pardonable admiration: an exquisite piece of work a full two yards long and three inches deep. Peaked and scalloped, it was a miracle of complicated design and intricate pattern, worked in the finest white crochet cotton. But having been done almost entirely in school hours while the children drowsed listlessly over their books and a subdued hum of inactivity filled the room, the lace was grey with dust, chalk and smoke.

She tripped down the narrow stairs, a plump girl with an innocent, vacuous, pink-and-white face and neat brown hair, and washed out the lace. Ten minutes later the delicate scallops were looped carefully over the clothes-line and pinned to a tea-towel. Mamie looked with distaste out over the land, brownish and dun colored with no hint of green as yet. She disliked its vastness, the monotony of its coloring, the unrestricted sweep of it to a horizon that was miles away. The yard was littered with the debris that the snow had formerly covered: the paint on the fence was greyish and checked, and that on the house seemed grimy in contrast to the frosty whiteness of the lace. She did not notice the vivid blue of the sky, nor appreciate the brisk fresh wind: the warm western chinook.

She went back into the house, avoiding with a shudder of dislike the stunted red calf which had just pushed the gate open and entered from the barnyard. Once back in her room, she sniffed, blotted a tear from the letter, and wrote,

"...our own dear little house. I just finished the lace; it's really and truly lovely. If only this dreadful war were over...!"

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It snowed that night and all the next morning, and Mamie was correspondingly depressed.

"It'll go in a day or two," consoled Griselda. "It's not cold. We'll have a real good look around the yard and clean up along the fence, an' Joe'll go to Maverick for the mail..."

"I wish he could go today!" sighed Mamie. "What are they doing there by the barn?"

Griselda looked over her shoulder towards the knot of men loafing around the barn door. She snorted indignantly.

"That red calf died last night. Stupid little critter! Dan an' Walter decided to open him up and see what he died of."

"Oh...!" Mamie turned greenish at the thought of the autopsy. "Do they do it often?"

"Only once on each animal," said Emma's cheerful voice behind them.

"Seems like every time it storms an' we can't have Sunday School those men think of something awful like that to do. The last time they cleaned the well," complained Griselda.

Something was animating the curious group at the barn -- the two Kerrigans, Ches Meade, Joe Griggs, another man.

"Must be funny!" commented Emma. "I never saw anyone carry on so over a dead calf!"

By and by the group broke up, still laughing.

Walter came back to the house and began to wash his hands in the porch.

"Well?" demanded his sister, "what's the joke, all of you laughing like mad out there?"

Her brother grinned and said nothing.

"What happened to the calf?"

"Indigestion, I guess. He had a lot of stuff in him -- about a quarter of a ball of binder twine and some old rags an' a leather strap an' one of Joe's cotton gloves..."

"No wonder he died,"

"That wasn't all."

"No? What else?"

Walter looked over his shoulder. "Well... we washed it out in the horsetrough... Ches thought we should bring it back...!"

A grinning face surmounted by a thatch of yellow hair and an old cap appeared in the door behind him. Ches's thin freckled face was split from ear to ear by his grin. He winked at Emma and turned to Mamie,

"We thought you'd like it back, Miss Treight! Walter was sayin' you felt awful bad about losin' it!"

On the end of a stick he held forth the sodden remains of Mamie's lace.

It was the last straw. Miss Treight did not return after the Easter holidays. Once more the school-board of Rolling Slopes was hard put to it to find a teacher. They

held a meeting, sitting disconsolately around the store.

"I give up!" said Oliver Harris. "I resign -- make a note of it, Jasper -- it's official! Anyway, I'm goin' back to Oregon after threshing this fall, an' I wouldn't complete my term. Which of you gents would like my job?"

There were no takers, and he continued in a tone of heavy jocularity,

"Of course, 'tain't the remuneration that makes it worth while! It's the honor of the thing! An' yer life's just one damned schoolteacher after another, ain't that so?"

No one denied that it was so.

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THE STRANGER

In the summer of 1918, Emma Kerrigan and Henry Burton were married. They settled down on Henry's homestead south of the store, where he had a comfortable little house, and were duly and noisily 'shivareed' by the neighbors. Griselda did her duty faithfully by her daughter: Emma's wedding was conventional and correct in every detail. Emma herself was in high spirits, Jasper beamed. Disappointment still pervaded Griselda like a cloud: she felt as if she were attending the wedding of a stranger. That her daughter should have been so unable to comprehend her feelings, or that, comprehending, she had deliberately turned her back on her mother's wishes without giving them even a thought,

had suddenly rendered Emma a stranger.

Then, too, Emma had spoken slightingly of her mother's community activities and the implications were painful to Griselda. She needed assistance: the loss of Mrs. MacGillis had thrown the burden of work back on her, almost redoubled in weight. She looked around for a trustworthy aide. The women who were then available bickered among themselves, they were jealous of her, of each other, or they were inefficient. A stranger, reflected Griselda, would be the solution...

Such a stranger there was: the difficulty lay in her absolute unwillingness to become a part of the district. In July Miss Frederika came to Rolling Slopes, an enigma from the first. Even Old Bill had never aroused half the curiosity that soon swirled about Miss Freddie. He was inarticulate, ever monotonously the same, had become so much a part of his surroundings that people lost interest in him. They knew precisely the pattern of his days -- the patrol of the fences, the dire threats to youthful trespassers, the bimonthly trek to the store...

But Miss Freddie from her first minute at Rolling Slopes stood out among her neighbors as vividly as the scarlet poppies in Griselda's flower-bed. Miss Freddie was odd, she was foreign, her manners had a polish that unnerved those who dealt with her. Her desire for privacy amounted to

a mania, and she had unlimited funds. She settled on the quarter north of Dan Meade, coming in by automobile shortly after her crew of builders arrived with cook car, bunk car and loads of materials. Rumors about her flew fast.

"Foreign woman..."

"She smokes...!"

"Drives a big car too...!"

Within a week she called at the store, riding a fine sorrel horse that excited almost as much attention as she did herself. She wore riding clothes: under the severe hat a heavy mass of black hair, braided and tightly coiled, streaked with grey, was pinned tightly to her head. She was a little above medium height, slender and erect, with small feet and meticulously gloved hands.

Ignoring the curious eyes and speculative murmurs of those in the store, she approached Jasper directly and spoke with him at length concerning the mail service, the supply of building materials available, the possibility of getting stuff hauled from Maverick. Jasper ventured upon personalities.

"Hope you'll like it here, Ma'am. I'd like you to meet my wife -- she'll see that you get acquainted with folks around."

"Thank you," replied Miss Freddie courteously. "Some other time, perhaps. I am rather hurried today."

And she moved away towards the door. The brilliant sunlight showed her to be about forty years of age, extremely dark, almost swarthy in coloring, with boldly-cut aquiline features. A sharply-chiselled nose, a determined cleft chin. In old age she would be witchlike, nutcracker-profiled, but now she was handsome in a gypsy fashion. Or rather, she would have been very handsome if life and animation had loosened the severe lines of her mouth and brought a sparkle to her eyes. They were her best feature, magnificient, heavy-lidded, and tragic, of a dark grey that looked in some lights almost brown. Above them her arched black brows drew together in a fold as though a cloud sat upon her brow, overshadowed her expression, a cloud of grief rather than of sullenness or anger.

And when Griselda finally met Miss Freddie, it was thanks to her own efforts, not to any advances made by the newcomer. She was not at first offended by Miss Freddie's curtness and reserve. Rather she was convinced that here was an ally worth having, if only she could be persuaded to take the part.

Miss Freddie's house went up slowly. But it was no tarpaper shack. The materials were good, the workmanship of the best. It had a fireplace, a tall stone chimney, many windows. Few people saw the interior of the house, but a

number dropped by out of curiosity to look at the building of it. Sometimes they were met by Miss Freddie herself, sometimes by the carpenters, sometimes by Alf. They were rarely invited in.

Most of Miss Freddie's business was conducted through Alf. He was a rabbity-looking little Englishman whose flat feet kept him out of the army, who dropped his h's recklessly, and who took a pessimistic view of Western Canada.

"Spyce!" Alf would ejaculate. "Spyce! An' nothin' in it -- not an 'ouse fer miles! Wot kind of w'y is that for blokes to live, I arsk yer?"

But Alf was devoted to Miss Freddie. He knew no more about her than did the others in her employ -- he too had been recently hired in Calgary -- but he was class conscious, and, as he said, he 'knew a lydy when he saw one!'

Alf's accent, his ignorance of Canadian ways, and his easily-discovered timidity made him an object of pleasantries which he took in good part. He was deathly scared of Indians, and his companions plied him with grisly tales of death and destruction, often concluding,

"Can't trust 'em, these Indians! You wanta watch out, Alf, when they come down to the ranch with corral poles next spring!"

Or: "Back where I come from, they always said the only good Indian was a dead Indian!"

Ches Meade varied the theme with horrible realism.

"You wanta watch out for that scalp of yours! They say they like hair that color -- sorta reddish! Shows up better'n the dark kind."

Poor Alf was stung to retaliate.

"'Ow about yer own 'air? Pretty light, ain't it?"

"Oh... I keep outa the way when there's Indians about. B'sides they got one yellow-haired scalp somewheres -- one with long hair -- a girl's I guess. But no red-haired one as I ever heard tell, an' I heard a lot about Indians!"

Alf grinned feebly, passing a protective hand over his gingery locks. "You're chaffin' me, Ches -- Indians don't go scalp-'untin' now..."

But his tone lacked conviction and he cast once or twice uneasy looks over his shoulder towards the far horizons whence the painted and tomahawked terror might be expected to fall.

After a while he became accustomed to the teasing, and because he took it well, it fell off. Alf, with his simplicity, his admiration for those who could do things according to the ways of this strange land, was really a likable little fellow.

He was taciturn about his employer. He could not, or would not, speak of Miss Frederika. People began to resent her unsociability, to regard her with suspicion as odd, freakish, "stuck-up", and foreign. An ugly rumor went the rounds that Miss Freddie was a pro-German, a spy.

Jasper Kerrigan took a common sense view of the matter.

"Doesn't seem to me there's much to spy on 'round here!"

"Well," protested the exponent of the spy theory, "how about that Conrad Busch that was hangin' around a year or two ago? The Mounties got after him, didn't they?"

"Yes," admitted Jasper, "They got after him for talking around that Canadians were fools to go to the war. 'Course he was a German -- anyone c'd see that, if he did have American citizenship. But I don't see that makes Miss Freddie one -- she doesn't go anywhere, nor talk to anybody."

Jasper's defence of her did not squash the gossip that raged about Miss Freddie. No one knew anything about her beyond that she had arrived in Calgary, bought her land and stock, and engaged workmen on an unprecedented scale. The latter said that she paid well, and left them alone. But they admitted she was odd.

"How -- odd...?"

Well, she was simply throwing money into the building, but her furniture was little better than you'd find in a bachelor's shack. And she didn't sleep much -- she wandered about at night through the incompleted rooms, and walked out over the fields at dusk or dawn... She talked to herself, too, said one, and sometimes she cried. It was odd too that she always wore gloves.

"Afraid of spoiling her hands," said Griselda uncharitably. "Ever notice how little her hands are? Never done a day's work in her life, I'll be bound!"

For Griselda by this time had made several attempts to draw Miss Freddie into community activities and had been courteously but firmly refused. Miss Freddie preferred to remain aloof and said so. One thing only came out in the course of that summer, and Ches Meade, who had worked on Miss Freddie's house, discovered that. He told it immediately and it added afresh to the curiosity about the stranger. Miss Freddie wore gloves because her hands were badly scarred with freshly-healed scars, perhaps of burns of recent date. Griselda revised her opinions somewhat after she, too, caught Miss Freddie without her gloves when she drove up with Jasper one day on business. The other woman flinched for a moment as if to put her hands behind her back, then recovered herself, and with a mechanical smile, reached for the thin leather gloves and drew them on.

"I wear them all the time when people are around," she murmured. "The scars are so -- so ugly..."

Her face contorted but she controlled it: her strange eyes stared past Griselda at something invisible to others. Griselda was embarrassed, oppressed by the sense of tragedy that hung about this woman. She found herself at a loss for words until Miss Freddie with quick tact changed the subject. Griselda went home convinced that it was not pride or a sense of her own superiority that kept Miss Freddie aloof.

"She's had trouble," she said to Jasper. "I guess we'd better leave her alone until she gets over it a bit."

Miss Frederika's house was up before the winter came on. The carpenters and workmen left, and she remained there alone save for two men, Alf and Sam, who attended to the animals. She had some fine stock. The big automobile was stored in Calgary, and, like her neighbors, Miss Freddie depended upon horses to take her where she wished to go. She went out seldom, but wrote many letters, and mail came for her every week, much of it from the United States, some from South America, some from England or France. She had few visitors, and as she never returned a call, they did not go again.

It was the unsociable side of the community, this,

lying north of the store. There in the rolling leaseland was the ranch, inhabited at that season only by Mr. Hampton-Reid, Harry Wise, and Lee Wong. Beside the bridge, just inside the lease, squatted Bill Lilly. He came to the store twice a month for food and tobacco: his furtive little figure, gun in hand, prowled the hills, or plodded along the coulee. In season of deep snow he wore snowshoes, skimming over the white world with uncanny ease. The local lads in their rabbit hunts gave the old man a wide berth.

Then, east of Old Bill's tarpaper shack there was Dan Meade's, with Dan and Ches. North of them again was Miss Freddie.

"Not one of 'em ever comes out," said Griselda sadly, if inaccurately. "That big room of Miss Freddie's would be a fine place for the women to meet and hold a quilting once in a while. But I guess if she don't want to mix, she don't have to."

"Well, you can see Alf every week if you've a mind to," said her husband consolingly.

"That Alf!" I don't know if he's as silly as he looks!.. Just grins away an' never a word to say!"

"How about Ches'n Dan? They spend enough time at the store if you want a good gossip with <u>them</u>," suggested Walter with serious face.

"Dan indeed!" Griselda spluttered with indignation. "Dan! An' that Ches! Well -- I don't know as you can expect much more of the boy, living there with Dan. But he's not turning out very well. And there's a limit to what the rest of us can do for him!"

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FORCES OF DESTRUCTION

Late that fall came the Armistice. The war over: and those who had had the thought of it heavy upon them for four long;years knew relief, but not for long. The Spanish influenza epidemic swept over one continent, crossed an ocean to invade a second, and crept westward. Eastern Canada and the United States, the big cities, the small western cities, the little towns, and finally the thinly populated farmland knew the infection of disease and fear. The terror of the 'flu was everywhere: depressing rumors of overcrowded hospitals, of soup kitchens established in the cities to feed those whose homes were disorganized by the epidemic, tales of whole families in remote spots stricken and dying, one by one, circulated from mouth to mouth. Travel was

restricted: people were ordered to wear masks.

Dan Meade, celebrating the Armistice in his accustomed fashion in the Prairie Vista Hotel, collapsed. He got a ride back to Rolling Slopes with a neighbor, and died two days later -- the first to be dug in the Rolling Slopes cemetery, half a mile east of the store. A cold north wind rustled through the tangled brown grass, flapped a tattered bit of paper caught in the barbed wire fence beside some dusty strands of wool from the sheep that Jackson had pastured there a couple of years before. A flurry of snowflakes whirled in the air before the ceremony was over that committed the body of Dan Meade, to the keeping of the prairie whence he had sought refuge from the struggle he could not face. A few people only were present at Dan's funeral, and the words of sympathy extended to his nephew were purely conventional.

"Guess you're on your own, now, Ches."

"I guess so..."

Ches himself felt little grief. He had lived for six years with Dan, and they had taken each other for granted. Dan's death was a surprise, but not a sorrow.

The winter turned colder. Deep snow fell and the coulee bottoms, the rough roads were almost impassable. The weather, the land, the 'flu all seemed to league together to terrorize humanity. A shadow lay upon the world, blacker than that the war had cast. For this dread was near at hand

and spared no one, whereas there were many at Rolling Slopes who had never felt the effects of the war save in an increased prosperity.

Griselda volunteered her services as nurse and accompanied the overworked doctor into several stricken homes. Her energy flagged under the continual strain, but she found at the time she was busiest an unexpected ally. Miss Frederika appeared at the store one day and demanded to see her.

"Can you nurse?" asked Griselda doubtfully when the offer was made.

"Yes," replied the other quietly. "Where shall I go?"

"There's Jackson's. And Ches Meade is sick. He's alone there -- it's an awful little place -- they never cleaned it up. There's a good well at Jackson's and she's a nice clean woman..."

"I would rather not go where there are children!"

Griselda accepted the vehement statement matter-of-factly.

"All right. I'll go there. Can you look in an' see how Ches is? Send Alf down tomorrow night an' let me know an' I'll tell the doctor when he comes on Friday."

"I'll come myself," said Miss Freddie. "Alf has been sick. So has Sam."

"You mean -- you had two of 'em ill at once?"

"Yes."

Griselda passed a hand over her aching brow.

"I guess you'll manage," she conceded.

Miss Freddie took some medicines and went her way, the snow flying like spray from the narrow runners of the cutter.

She nursed Ches for several days, and when he was better sent Alf, by then recovered, to stay for three days more. Miss Freddie herself moved on to the ranch where Harry Wise was the only one to escape the contagion, and from there to a farm west of the lease.

As spring came on, the shadow lifted, and the 'flu subsided. But it had been a dreadful winter: a nightmare reminder to Griselda of the years she had spent in isolation faced by inimical wilderness, winter, and sickness.

Nor did it end with the coming of spring, for in May, after the crops were seeded, there was a great blizzard, a freak storm that lasted for three days and nights and piled snow high over the tops of buildings and strawstacks. Joe's little shack was almost buried in the high drift raised by the Kerrigans' buildings and the store. Losses on the range were tremendous, for the cattle were back on the lease, and Mr. Hampton-Reid could count his dead cows, each with its calf, by the hundreds. Many had drifted before the driving wind, only to suffocate in the deep snow of the creek-bed.

Old Bill Lilly was dug out of his drift like a hibernating bear. He manifested about as much gratitude for the favor, grunting something that might as well have been a curse as a word of thanks.

"Damned if I know why we bothered," said Harry Wise, shouldering his shovel as he prepared to move on. "He might as well be under the snow as above it! We'll get as much thanks from the cows if there's any left alive in that hollow!

Since the 'flu epidemic Miss Freddie was on a different footing with her neighbors. People no longer resented her aloofness, but came to take for granted Griselda's explanation of it.

"She's had trouble -- that's what makes her so queer. But she's good-hearted for all that."

Other rumors -- those concerning Miss Freddie's foreign ways and the newspapers in strange languages that came for her -- were lulled when old Mr. Hampton-Reid called on her. He only went twice in the months she remained at Rolling Slopes, but he was solicitous for her welfare and often sent up a man to see if she wanted any help. Thus it seemed certain that she was persona grata with the Mounted Police.

Meanwhile Miss Freddie seemed happier. She worked around the farmyard and commenced raising poultry. Her

neighbors took to dropping in occasionally, offered advice which was gracefully received, and departed, issuing invitations to visit them. Miss Freddie thanked them, and rarely accepted.

At the end of July, Ches Meade went to Calgary and there saw Miss Freddie and Alf, accompanied by a severe-looking grey haired man, entering an office block. Only the fact that the movie to which he was bound started in ten minutes kept him from waiting around to intercept them. As it was, he gave speculation a free rein.

The explanation was actually so simple as to be uninteresting. Miss Freddie had gone up to get her car out of storage: Alf had made an emergency visit to the dentist. But when Ches got back to Rolling Slopes, one of the first things he saw was Miss Freddie's big car with Alf at the wheel. He brought up the subject for discussion at the store.

"Seen Miss Freddie an' Alf drivin' around in the car?"

"They went past twice today," said Jasper Kerrigan.

"She's teachin' him to drive," volunteered Ches, who had extracted this information from Sam who likewise worked for Miss Freddie.

"That so?"

"Looks like Alf had a permanent job there," remarked one of the men.

"I shouldn't wonder if Alf was runnin' the place pretty soon," said Ches significantly. Gratified by the interest aroused by this statement, he went on,

"He's crazy about her."

Someone demurred. "Aw, she wouldn't look at Alf. What would a woman like that -- educated an' got money an' looks -- if you like 'em dark -- what would she want with a funny little fellow like Alf?"

"It's amazing what some women will marry, an' some men too, for that matter," said Mr. Kerrigan.

Mrs. Redding, an inveterate gossip, broke into the laughter.

"Do you mean to say, Ches Meade, that Miss Freddie an' Alf are gettin' married?"

Ches hesitated, reluctant to seem ignorant of such an interesting matter. He was not often listened to with such breathless attention.

"Aw, come on, Ches! What d'ye know? You're always up there at Miss Freddie's."

"All I know," said Ches, drawing it out deliberately, "isn't much... I seen 'em in Calgary last week with an' old grey-haired guy an' they all seemed pretty friendly. An' now she's teaching him to drive her car. Looks like there might be a reason!"

The evidence was weighed for a few seconds.

"Man an' woman don't live long together on the prairie 'thout gettin' married -- if they can!" pronounced one listener. Instances were immediately forthcoming.

"Johnson married his housekeeper an' her nearly ten years older if she's a day!"

"Jack Kesson married his partner's sister that came out to live with them!"

"There was that old bachelor just this side of Maverick -- what's - 's-name...?"

"I wouldn't be a bit surprised," said Mrs. Redding. "She lets Alf handle all her business."

"An' she does seem a lot more settled lately..."

"How about it, Jasper?"

"I don't know." Mr. Kerrigan shook his head. He was uneasy over the whole situation: Griselda was away from home and was not expected back for two weeks, and at moments like this he missed her quick grasp of the matter. He knew that he could deal with the men at any time, but when the women came on the scene, he was at a loss. He temporized.

"She's an educated woman an' Alf's pretty ignorant. But Alf's learnt a lot since he came here, an' he looks out for Miss Freddie pretty well. Still, I doubt they'd ever get married."

But public opinion continued to favor the idea of marriage. Griselda was away: she would have been quite capable of asking Miss Freddie outright if she were married. Mrs.

Redding did not: instead she asked Alf. He immediately became violently flustered and denied it with such vehemence that his interrogator was convince he was a bad liar. Other people asked him with the same results. Ches embellished his tale a little, and without too much ornament it confirmed the notion that there had been a wedding.

When someone suggested a charivari, the idea spread. These celebrations were in the air: there had been several local weddings lately and each couple was noisily 'shivareed' by the neighbors who collected late at night around the dwelling with all sorts of noisemakers to raise a din. After five minutes of clamour, they trooped inside, bearing the 'eats' for the occasion, and held a crowded and noisy impromptu housewarming for the couple. If the latter were lucky, they had received warning of what was to befall. Otherwise it came as a total and often embarrassing surprise.

Several people demurred at the notion of a 'shivaree' for Miss Freddie.

"She's so queer -- do you think she'd like it?" said Emma Burton doubtfully when the idea was proposed to her. "And who says she <u>is</u> married?"

"Everybody knows it," said Mrs. Redding impatiently. She was an assertive, talkative woman with a long-standing conflict with Griselda in the Women's Club. "Ches Meade saw them in Calgary just coming out of church."

"Ches is the worst liar that I know" said Emma. "If he says so, you can be sure it's wrong! Mother'll be back in a week -- she knows Miss Freddie better than anyone else does."

"There's quite a lot goes on in this community your mother doesn't know!" snapped the other. "An' some of us think we're quite capable of doing things without her to tell us!"

"And some of you would be dead too, if it wasn't for my mother," said Emma angrily.

The shot told, and the woman rose to go.

"Oh, I don't say your mother doesn't do a lot for the community -- she does. Don't think that, Emma. When did you say she'll be back?"

Two days before Griselda's return, the charivari party assembled at Ches Meade's place. It did not include the Burtons, the Kerrigans, or the Nordstaads, but was composed entirely of the more frivolous elements of the community.

The group decided to drive over the field, taking a short cut that would bring them out behind Miss Freddie's barn and granaries, well away from the house.

In line the buggies crept along, and the riders trotted beside them. Laughter and talk fell off as they neared the buildings. A few hasty directions were given and

received.

"You take the east side of the house, George, an' wait till I whistle...!

"Is there a dog?"

"Ches'll look after the dog -- it knows him..."

"Where's the tin?"

"Holy Moses! don't shake it, man...!"

"Give us a hand here to hold this thing still...!"

Two dark figures grasped the clumsy sheet of galvanized iron, attempting to carry it and muffle the tinny thunder it emitted when shaken.

The men and boys slipped out of sight among the buildings. The women of the party hung back, whispering, in a little crowd near the fence where the tethered horses munched and stamped.

It was a warm, dark, moonless night, oppressive and airless. A few dim stars gleamed overhead, and the vague outlines of the low hills blended into the sky without sharp demarcation. Against the general dimness the buildings stood up black and distinct and massive with a solidity that daylight denied to their ordinary wooden structure.

Only at one corner of the house the lamplight stramed out between curtains that did not quite meet, cutting a yellow wedge in the darkness. Fluttering moths danced in

the ray of light: the watchers were plagued by humming mosquitoes. A girl giggled shrilly, another hushed her, and subdued rustle ran through the group.

"I don't think -- I -- I'm not sure about this..." said a low, hesitating voice. There was a murmur of assent, and one woman shifted her basket of sandwiches to the other arm.

"It don't seem like a charivari somehow."

"That's just 'cause Miss Freddie ain't so well known to us as -- oh, as Emma and Henry..."

"Maybe you're right there. Was that the signal for us to move up?"

No one moved willingly. The place was unfamiliar to them, and the reserve that the strange woman, its owner, cast about herself seemed to be in the very air, to hang broodingly from the dark sky, to lay clogs upon their feet, binding them to the dark earth. A little figure dogded back to them.

"Hey, Mom! The men are all ready. Why don't you come?"

Thus bidden, the group moved slowly up the little slope towards the buildings. Passing between the barn and the granaries they stationed themselves at the rear of the house. Then with a thunderous rattle of the galvanized iron

sheet, pandemonium opened in Miss Freddie's yard. The clang of an iron triangle came in like the notes of a tolling bell. The rattle of the school hand-bell, an iron spoon beating on a tin pan, pebbles shaken in a tin bucket, a variety of whistles, children's toy trumpets all contributed to the din.

The door flew open and lamplight streamed into the night. Miss Frederika stepped into the lighted square: her figure looked taller than usual in a long dark-red robe, her heavy black hair hung loose below her waist. For a moment she stood blinded by the darkness.

"Who is it?" she cried. "Who are you? Why are you making this noise?" Her strained voice, her tense attitude betrayed her fear. One or two of the watchers stepped forward to reassure her and to explain. The remainder of the charivari party pressed forward from the darkness. Then, suddenly a frantic little figure burst into the lighted square -- Alf, half-dressed, his dishevelled gingery locks on end, his prominent grey eyes popping. He carried the little axe from the bunkhouse wood-pile in his hands: with one arm he swept Miss Freddie from the door-step back into the kitchen and took up his stand upon the threshold. Alf, the timid, aroused from his slumbers by an infernal din, had determined to sell his life dearly in protecting Miss Freddie.

Then the tension snapped in a gust of hysterical laughter. Alf recognized his neighbors and dropped the axe,

and people came slowly towards the door, or recognizing that they had made a dreadful mistake, stood back uneasily out of the light. Sam, the stolid Pole, appeared blinking from the bunkhouse, and his first stumbling words to Alf confirmed the error.

"What's matter, Alf. What you wanta bring da axe here?"

Those on the outskirts of the charivari party who had not yet shown themselves melted quiety away -- not far away. Inside the house embarrassing explanations were taking place and a morbid curiosity to see the end of it all possessed everyone.

"What is it? Why are you here?" Faced by people she knew, Miss Freddie had recovered her poise, and a deepening line between her black brows indicated that she was not going to be satisfied with anything less than a complete explanation. To tell her that they had thought she was married to Alf was quite at that moment beyond anyone's powers. Alf, espying Ches in the group, dragged him aside and demanded an answer, and Ches's reply filled in clearly the awkward silence in the kitchen.

"We thought you an' Miss Freddie was married, Alf, honest we did -- you bein' in Calgary with her an' drivin' her car an' all..."

Poor Alf was smitten dumb for the moment, but the brief ineffectual gestures he made to silence Ches were lost. Miss Freddie caught the words.

"Married!" she said, her deep voice almost strident. "Married!" Who said that?" she looked about the uneasy, hang-dog circle of faces: at Alf, crimson and fidgety, and Ches and Sam, whose dark, mask-like face was quite expressionless. One or two of the women tittered under the look, one began to cry.

She turned back to Alf. "Did you tell them that?" He flinched and stuttered, and her relentless voice cut across his splutterings like a lash.

"Answer me! Did you tell these people -- <u>that</u>!"

Evidently, Alf's misery reassured her, for she turned back to the others and spoke quietly.

"No one has been married here. You have made a mistake. Now go!"

There was a movement towards the door. One or two stopped to apologize, but Miss Freddie cut them short.

"Leave me alone!" she said bitterly. "Why do you not leave me alone? Get out! Get off my land and never come here again! Go, I tell you!"

They left her there, erect in her long red robe, her grey-brown eyes staring into space, her chiselled features

hard. When all were out, Alf followed them and gently closed the door.

"You hadn't oughta done it," he said miserably to the dim forms in the darkness. "She's had enough trouble. You hadn't oughta done it! She was feelin' so much better an' now you went an' done this to 'er!"

He disappeared into the bunk house and Sam, shrugging his shoulders, followed. Confused and ashamed, the charivari party went to their separate homes.

For many weeks afterwards the incident was the only subject of discussion. It had been highly unfortunate for all concerned, and they sought for a scapegoat to blame. Ches Meade seemed a likely target of anger for a while, but he defended himself hotly, and no one could remember that he had actually said Miss Freddie and Alf were married. Gradually the anger and resentment turned back on Miss Freddie.

"'Course it was a mistake, an' we apologized! An' look how she took it -- wouldn't listen -- ordered us off the place!"

"She could 'a been a sport about it an' not acted like that!"

Two weeks later Miss Freddie was gone. Alf announced the fact two days after her departure. Then a lawyer came out from Calgary to arrange for the disposal of her property,

and in the course of a talk with Mr. Kerrigan revealed the mystery of Miss Freddie's conduct. He proved to be the same grey-haired man who had excited Ches's curiosity in Calgary.

"A remarkable woman!" he said. "Well... it is only right that she should take up her life again where it left off."

Mr. Kerrigan made a murmur of assent, and the lawyer continued.

"She should never have come out here -- there's nothing here for a woman like that!" His gaze swept the rolling land to the distant skyline, and he added, "But of course she was old Vanloder's grandaughter, and I suppose she remembered the country from when she was a child. His ranch was just about here, wasn't it?"

Mr. Kerrigan agreed. "Before my time, but the Vanloder lease started about here - in the '80's." Much of the information was new to him, and he cast out bait.

"A tragedy..." he remarked, and the lawyer responded in gratifying detail.

"A tragedy indeed -- I remember when it came out in the papers. Both children burned to death in the summer-house on the country estate. Her husband used it as a studio of course, and it was full of paints and oils. They thought she would go out of her mind."

"Those scars..."

"Trying to save the children.. But she's gone back to her husband now.. I wonder..." He looked up at the solid, well-built house. "You'd think she'd intended to live here for the rest of her life! Better as it is -- much better!"

Alf and Sam remained on Miss Freddie's farm until after harvest. Then they too left, and only the house with the stone chimney remained to show that Miss Freddie with her grief and her obsession had once sojourned at Rolling Slopes, endeavoring to wrest from her solitude forgetfulness of her tragedy.

Griselda, arriving home some days after the ill-fated 'shivaree', was shocked and angered by the news of it. Miss Freddie's tragic voice rang in her ears: her curtness took on a new and dreadful significance.

"I would rather not go where there are children..."

"The scars are so ugly..."

Anger gathered slowly within her against the people who had let themselves be deceived into taking part in the 'shivaree' - some of them had been the recipients of Miss Freddie's kindness during the epidemic. Had they then no perception, no feelings, no sense, that they should do such a thing, knowing as they did her aloofness and reserve?

"Poor thing!" said Griselda. "If I'd been here, it never would have happened! If I'd come back when I planned

to, instead of staying that extra week, I could have spared her that!"

She could not make up her mind to agree with the old lawyer's summing up of the matter, his assumption that Miss Freddie was wise to take up her old life once more.

"She'll never forget there. But here -- she might!" And, moreover, ran the unspoken thoughts, a woman like that -- if she so chose -- could do much, so much, in a country district. Griselda, for whom work was ever a panacea, sighed at the thought of the waste that a few irresponsibles had brought about.

"We needed her, and she needed us... I'll give them a piece of my mind!

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Subsequently she allowed herself that luxury, waiting until Mrs. Redding, her private thorn-in-the-flesh, and the organizer of the abortive charivari, had had her say about it at a Club meeting. Mrs. Redding was injured.

"And the way she talked to us you wouldn't believe! We was just trying to be neighborly too, but that's what you get for trying to be good to foreigners!"

"Miss Freddie's an American like you are," said Griselda with satisfaction. Mrs. Redding flushed and bridled, and Griselda continued,

"And I think you got what was coming to you, buttin' in on people that wanted nothing but to be let alone. It's time these shivarees stopped -- nothing but a chance for people to make nuisances of themselves!"

"Back in the States..." began the indignant victim, her hand trembling so that she could hardly make the next stitch on the quilt that was spread out between the two opponents, "back home we think it's quite a neighborly thing to give people a shivaree!"

"Time you all outgrew that nonsense," returned the descendant of Loyalists. "So far's any more doings for new-married folks is concerned, I'm all for having 'em in the school, like a social, an' breakin' up with a dance like civilized folks, 'stead of a bunch of painted Indians yellin' 'round the house! And speaking of the school -- it's getting too small for the crowd we get now. Time we thought of a hall here -- maybe the U.F.A. would come in on the building of one."

And in the discussion that followed this suggestion, the outraged Mrs. Redding had no opportunity to justify herself further.

A NEUTRAL MOTHER

Before 1920, the veterans had returned to Rolling Slopes. Albert Horner was soon followed by his wife, Maude, and the two little boys. Griselda awaited the arrival of Maude with some interest: she had always like Albert, and she had a secret hope that Maude might fill the role she had destined for Miss Freddie.

But Maude, although she fitted in well at Rolling Slopes, was not of a type to make a community leader. A cheerful, bustling little person, better educated than her husband, she quickly made friends. Within a few years she had come to be Griselda's favorite among the younger women.

Mrs. MacGillis, it seemed, was not to be easily replaced. Of Emma, Griselda made few demands. Since Emma had deliberately closed a door between them, Griselda was not

going to be the first to open it. Emma attended club meetings and church, and did an average amount of work for the Ladies' Aid. But for organization, special committees, or teaching Sunday School, Griselda looked for aid elsewhere. Most of the women had young children and their time was limited. Mrs. Price, whose youngest child, Eileen, was now twelve, was as uncertain and inefficient as ever. But Doris Price, for two years, became an unexpectedly valuable ally to Griselda.

She was still unmarried, an unattractive girl with pale, thin features and a gawky figure. As in her school days, she was still painfully conscious of the fact. But she was an able and willing helper with the Women's Institute, an untiring worker for the many dances, socials, and raffles that were held between 1920-1924 to raise funds to build the community hall. Griselda invariably selected Doris as an assistant in preference to Mabel Prescott who often volunteered her services, perhaps in an effort to placate Walter's antagonistic mother.

Antagonistic she still was, and remained so during the years when Walter and Mabel's romance seemed to stand still. In the spring of 1920, however, she had almost reconciled herself to the marriage. Walter went to see Mabel every week: he had discussed a business partnership with his father. To Griselda he said little, and she was determined not to ask.

"They can come and tell me!" she said, and her

attitude was so forbidding that Walter's courage froze whenever he tried to mention Mabel. He was naturally inarticulate, and lacked the stolidity that enabled his father and sister to cope so well with Griselda's difficult moods by ignoring them until such time as she gave in.

Griselda was quite conscious that she had no legitimate grounds for objecting to Mabel Prescott, and she was wise enough not to speak of her prejudice to anyone but Jasper or Emma.

"Girl's got no gumption!" she said tartly. "No more brains than God give a goose! Walter's too easy-going anyway. He needs a wife with some get-an'-go to her!"

"To tell the truth," remarked Jasper thoughtfully, "I can't see you approvin' of a gal that bossed Walter around the way you do!"

Emma was equally doubtful.

"Oh, Mother, you know very well you wouldn't think much of <u>any</u> girl that Walter married! Mabel's just the kind he needs. He'd send any lively girl crazy -- poking around as if he was about forty, 'stead of twenty-five!"

Griselda began to entertain serious doubts of her own position, and to reconsider her stand on Mabel. But she made no gesture of reconciliation towards the young people, and the events of the Valentine's Day box social took matters out of her hands.

This affair was of course held in the schoolroom, that the children had decorated beforehand. Twisted red-and-white paper streamers ran from corner to corner: enormous red hearts with white frills were tacked up at each window. On the front blackboard, an enormous valentine in colored chalks presented the conventional display of hearts, bluebirds, tulips, and roses. A display of valentines made by the school in art class hung on a string all along the side blackboard, ornamented with hearts and arrows, blotted cupids in pale pink, lobster-red, or crimson, and lavish borders of gilt paint. The side blackboard itself was, by public request, kept clear of chalk decorations, for the sake of those who came to socials and dances to lounge against the side walls.

The box social was almost ready to begin when Dave Wilkie arrived. He was by nature unsociable and hard-working: his absence from community merrymakings was taken as a matter of course. But on this occasion he wore a neat navy-blue serge suit instead of the overalls in which he was familiar to his neighbors, and his long, stubborn jaw was without its usual crop of fair bristles.

"Dave's sure spruced up!" was the general comment. "What's up?"

Dave greeted his neighbors curtly and sat down on one of the long benches under the windows. Sone of the school

desks had been piled up in the cloakrooms, others were pushed to the back of the room and boards spread across to serve for tables for the lunch. After supper they too would be piled up to increase the size of the cleared space for dancing.

Several men sat along the side benches, and a knot of idle lads, Ches Meade, Walter Kerrigan, Maurice Jackson, Bertie Price, and others, talked, laughed loudly, and jostled by the stove at the back of the room. The women entering by ones and twos had to walk the length of the room to deposit their baskets in the boarded-off well at the side of the stage.

Five minutes argument among the men concluded with Albert Horner stepping up on the platform. He acknowledged a hearty clapping with a polite bow and rapped loudly onthe teacher's desk.

"School's called!" said Ches.

"Gentlemen!" began Albert Horner in a slow voice, "We'll make it lively. This corner's full of gorgeous boxes!" He dived into the wooden well and drew out a box loosely wrapped in newspaper. "Now," he continued, "let me tell you, ever since I met a pal in Lunnon with a bloke that 'ad been with Allenby's mob, I've always fancied one of these 'arems. An' I'll bid meself on every box to see if I can't sit up 'ere on the stage with 'alf a dozen of the best looking ladies in Rolling Slopes. Yer better look lively, gents --better

look lively! Now then..."

He stripped off the newspaper and held up the brightly-colored box.

"Look at this 'un would you gents! Red, white an' blue -- patriotic I calls it. Who'll bid me 'igh for a flying start?"

"Two bits!" said a disrespectful voice from the rear.

"Garn!" said Mr. Horner scornfully. "Two bits, 'e says...'oo bid two bits on this lovely box? Is that Ches Meade? Ah, you'll never come to good, me lad, valuing the labor of a woman's 'hands like that! Now I'll bid a quid -- I mean a buck!"

"One an' a half," squeaked Joe Griggs.

"Two," said Mr. Kerrigan.

"Two an' a quarter," came clearly from the huge Nordstaad.

"That's the way, boys, that's the way," encouraged Albert. "Keep 'er up. Any advance on two an' a quarter?"

"Two-fifty." It was Henry Burton's low voice.

"Two-fifty? Any advance on two-fifty? Going at fifty...going...gone! Sold for two-fifty to Henry Burton! I guess I don't get Emma for lunch!"

Henry Burton, without opening the box to find the name of its owner, had made a bee-line for his wife.

"Next, gents, we'll 'ave this pink one with the cupids on it. Ah-h-h-- there's a pretty box for me corner -- fair treat this one is, eh, Maude? I'll start this one at a dollar. Any advance on a dollar, gents?"

"Two-fifty!" The surprise bid came from George Evans, Burton's hired man. There was no advance on the bid and Evans, apparently knowing without looking whose box he had bought, crossed the room to claim Doris Price as his partner. Doris, still pale and gawky, flushed self-consciously as the boys at the back whistled and clapped.

The sale proceeded merrily, Albert's quips keeping the crowd amused.

"Would yer look at this one now? Bid quickly, Gents! Bid quickly -- I can't 'old this 'ere box for long -- it's 'eavy, gents!"

The crowd guffawed and Maude Horner shook her fist at her husband.

"One dollar," shouted Walter Kerrigan.

"I'll bid one-fifty," said Albert. "Any advance on one-fifty? Going, going..."

"Two," said Ches, grinning.

"Two an' a quarter," said Mr. Horner. "Any advance?" But the box was his, and he handed it to his little son with the caution, "Don't drop it, now, Jim...mind yer toes if you do!"

One of the last baskets that came up was a daintily decorated circular affair with green and lavender ribbon bows.

"'ere's a beauty!" said Albert. "What's the bidding?"

But the crowd had almost spent itself and no bid came for moment. Then a low "two dollars" sounded.

Albert looked quizzically at the speaker and then across to Ches Meade

"Worth more'n two dollars, ain't it Ches?"

"Three," said Ches, responding to the wink, and Walter, the first bidder, raised it to four. A knowing grin spread from face to face, and several men joined in the bidding.

"Four-twenty-five!"

"Fifty!"

"Any advance on four-fifty? Four fifty...."

"Five!" Walter reddened. Across the room Mabel Prescott, a knot of the green and lavender ribbon at the throat of her white blouse, sat watching, pretending an indifference that her high color denied. She had not changed greatly in the four years since she came to Rolling Slopes. She was gentle, good-natured, with beauty that depended more upon her abundant golden hair and exquisite coloring than upon distintion of feature or animation of expression.

"Five an' a quarter!" said Jasper Kerrigan, and a roar of laughter went up.

"You'll lose the old man yet!" said Engvald Nordstaad to Griselda.

"Seems like it's got to be one or the other of 'em!" she replied drily.

The bidding went ahead rapidly and the box was already at a record price. At ten dollars, Walter began to look uneasy. Although he wanted desperately to buy the box, he was saving money to buy a ring, and he wanted to get a good one. He cast an appealing look towards Mabel, sitting serenely beside her married sister. She was deeply flushed, had never looked prettier. He would gladly have moved across to consult her in this emergency, but the intervening space was becoming crowded with desks and lunching couples, and every eye was fixed on him, or on Mabel, or on the box.

"Looks like he's in for it!" drawled Henry Burton.

"It's a shame," said Emma angrily. "Those boys are mean!"

But Ches and his cronies had dropped out of the bidding, and it seemed that walter might get the box for twelve dollars.

"Going at twelve," shouted Mr. Horner. "Any advance on twelve dollars, going..."

"Fifteen dollars!"

Even Albert Horner was taken aback. He recovered quickly.

"Thank you, Dave! Fifteen I'm bid. Any advance?

Who'll raise it?....Fifteen... going, going...gone to Dave Wilkie at fifteen dollars!"

In awed silence, Dave Wilkie clumped across the room to claim the box, a big man with a long, hard jaw, and close-set grey eyes. He had a fresh, healthy coloring and a thatch of hair nearly as fair as Mabel's own. Watching him settle himself beside her at the desk, a good many came to the conclusion that Walter Kerrigan stood little chance there now.

So, indeed, it proved. Walter could not explain himself to Mabel. She alleged that he had embarrassed her 'before all those people' by not taking her box whatever it might cost. The match which Mrs. Kerrigan had feared never came to pass: late that summer, Mabel married Dave Wilkie.

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Walter as usual, had little to say. Griselda was uneasily conscious that if, at any time in the past two years, she had given the slightest sign of relenting towards Mabel, things would have turned out very differently. She excused herself in vain,

"I never said a word to Walter against her, or to her..." for her own inner accuser would not be denied. The hard core of her had triumphed once more, and against it the softer people, Walter and Mabel, like Luke and Mary Belle,

beat in vain, fell back defeated. She had been right before, and not happy. This time she was sure she was right, and certainly she was no happier.

Walter's partnership with his father went forward as arranged, and the store was enlarged and expanded to meet the increasing demands of a growing community. The new front of it read JASPER KERRIGAN AND SON: GROCERIES, DRY GOODS, HARDWARE. Walter was firmly established as a part of the community, and on the general level.

THE FIRST CHANGES

The summer of 1920 found Rolling Slopes a settled and permanent community. The veterans were all back on their farms again and unoccupied land had been taken up by new settlers. Two or three farms had changed hands. The Olsons had gone, so had Oliver Harris. Except for the long wedge of the hilly lease, last of its kind in that part of the country, the land was all fenced and farmed. Perhaps that knowledge helped to sever Mr. Hampton-Reid's hold on life. He died suddenly during his convalescence from a mild attack of 'flu, and the ranch passed to his nephew, whom the Kerrigans remembered as a slim, fair, polite lad of thirteen: the boy who had loved his exciting summer on the ranch in 1908.

Harry Wise was left to oversee and manage the ranch until its new owner, Richard Hampton-Reid, should give instructions as to its disposal, or take it over himself. Returning on the train to Maverick with the Kerrigans after the funeral, Harry was pessimistic. He deplored the ceremony that had been attended by an imposing number of old-timers from all over the west, and dignified by the presence of representatives of the Mounted Police and the Army.

"Don't seem right," he muttered, "puttin' him in that cemetery with all them strangers. He wouldn't like it-- he liked his privacy! I wish we could of buried him out somewheres on the lease -- that big hill where the Indians usta camp, or overlookin' the house an' the crick. He'd've liked that -- didn't like to be crowded."

Jasper assented sympathetically, and Griselda said nothing. She could not understand why a man should object to being buried among his own kind, any more than she could the desire to lead a life apart from humanity. It seemed to her that privacy was a good thing in moderation, but not when carried to extremes. In life, one's house was exclusively one's own -- in death, one's coffin. What need then of all the outdoors within the circle of the broad horizon to watch in life, alone, to slumber in for eternity?

But Jasper understood: as he understood the man while he lived, he could appreciate Harry Wise's estimate of

him now he was dead.

"Men!" thought Griselda. "I do believe they're all alike..

Aloud she observed,

"That young man may not want the ranch, an' in that case it might go for homesteads?"

Harry Wise nodded glumly looking out of the coach windows where the smoke of the engine billowed past.

"Soldier, isn't he?" said Jasper.

"Yeah. Not likely he'll keep it. He got married a while back -- I don't s'pose she'd want to come out here an' live on a ranch. But Dick usta like the ranch -- him an' the old man got along fine. He was proud of the young chap an' his medals he got in the war... But I s'pose he'll sell now..."

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Harry Wise's gloomy prediction was not fulfilled. The young Hampton-Reids came to Canada in 1921 and lived for some months on the Grasmere Ranch.

That same year saw the beginning of a trend away from the prairie settlements. There had been a drought, and hail, and farmers who had moved into Rolling Slopes from the prairies of Saskatchewan and Manitoba and the United States listened with interest to reports of the Peace River country.

The gaily colored maps issued by the Dominion Government told a fascinating story of unoccupied land in the north. Most of the homesteads in the south were taken up: a few grazing leases remained on the prairies, timber berths in the wooded foothills, and large tracts of privately-owned land were still unsettled. But the price per acre was high in the latter, whereas the brown patches on the maps of the north were limitless and almost free. They represented hundreds of thousands of acres of fertile land, a whole new country to be settled.

The appeal was undeniable, and all over the west farmers wondered if they might not have been better off in a country where lumber was to be had for the cutting, where firewood was plentiful, and the high bush broke the force of the wind. In Rolling Slopes, one of the earliest settlers, Elmer Jackson, sold out and went north. The sale of his household and farm effects, accumulated over a period of ten or more years, was well attended.

"Did you get the binder, Engvald?" observed Albert Horner as he lit his pipe in the sunny, sheltered lee of Jackson's big barn.

The big Norwegian shrugged. "Not for sale."

"Seems to me he's takin' the good stuff and leaving the junk," complained Horner. "I could do with that wagon

and he's taking it -- disc too."

"He'll need it," said Jasper Kerrigan. "Prices are high in the north. It's the freight. Elmer's shipping a carload."

He shifted to avoid a drip from the eaves. "Good day for the sale -- sure warmed up!"

The day that had begun cloudy and cold was now too warm for the men to wear their heavy coats. A brisk March Chinook was softening the snow underfoot, a steady drip ran from the roofs of the buildings, and the well-trampled yard was deep in dirty slush. At two o'clock the sale was in full swing. The cattle and horses were disposed of, the last of the machinery was up for sale now, and the crowd was beginning to disperse, ready to move to the next point of interest.

"Wouldn't like to be settling up again meself," said Albert Horner. "Never thought Jackson would leave now."

"His wife's been at him for a long time," remarked Mr. Kerrigan. "She oughta be satisfied now -- all French where they're going -- Grouard."

Nordstaad said nothing, but a flicker of satisfaction lightened for an instant his impassive face. For the past three years he had been trying to buy more land, with little success. Ches Meade, approached after his uncle's

death, had refused to sell. George Evans, who had come to the district as Burton's hired man, had anticipated Nordstaad in the purchase of Miss Freddie's farm. It was still 'Miss Freddie's farm' although it had changed hands twice since she lived there. Nordstaad and Evans had had words about the land, for the former regarded it as something more that coincidence that Doris Price, who had been working at Nordstaad's during harvest, was now about to be married to George Evans.

"Vell, you send your woman to find out vhere iss land for sale, hey?" he demanded of Evans a week after discovering that he had lost the quarter. Evans, a little weedy-looking fellow with lank reddish hair with a hang-dog look, was truculent on the instant.

"The land was for public sale, wasn't it? You had no agreement with the owner, did you?"

"I vant to know where you found out it vass for sale so qvick," said Nordstaad. "Maybe Doris tell you?"

Doris who was present, burst into tears and Nordstaad, somewhat discomfited withdrew, convinced nevertheless that Doris had betrayed to her sweetheart his intention of buying the land. It was the beginning of the bad blood between Evans and Nordstaad that lasted on for years. Doris and Minna, under Griselda's forbidding eye, subdued their

differences well enough, but their husbands were never more than barely civil to each other at the best, and in after years the quarrel was carried on at school by the children.

However, on the day of the sale Nordstaad had just bought Jackson's land, and he was in a good mood.

"Vell, I'd hate to start clearing brush before I could put in the crop," he observed, and the others assented. The auctioneer, carrying his buffalo coat, crossed the yard towards an assorted pile of household and farm equipment piled near the house. Several women hurried out of the house, and the schoolchildren, who had a half-holiday for the occasion, tagged along with their parents.

"What am I bid for the gramaphone, ladies and gentlemen?" cried the auctioneer. "Fine machine -- listen -- I'll start her going!"

"I need sympathy, sympathy, just sympathy..." wailed the gramaphone before its tinny voice was extinguished,

"What am I bid?... And the gramaphone switched to "Swanee River".

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The Jacksons left, and the Reddings, and Ches Meade, who bade fair to be as restless and irresponsible as his uncle, likewise went north to homestead. Some fleeting impulse of prudence made him keep his quarter at Rolling Slopes.

He rented it to George Evans on shares, and left for the Peace River homesteading block in the early summer of 1921. For three years Rolling Slopes saw nothing and heard little of him.

Doris Price married George Evans and went to live in Miss Freddie's house. The long room with the fireplace was thrown open now to the meetings of the Women's Institute and the Ladies' Aid, and Dorsi began to assert herself as she had never done before. Imperceptibly, over the next year or two, she changed sides, moving away by degrees from Griselda and her faithful supporters, Mrs. Horner and Mrs. Nordstaad, past the large middle-of-the-road group that included Mrs. Price, Emma Burton, and Mabel Wilkie, over to the disaffected. The latter had received a setback when their leader of some years' standing, Mrs. Redding, left for the Peace River. Instead of a definite opposition, they formed a shifting group that sided sometimes with Griselda, sometimes, covertly, against her. They made little open objection to her policy, fearing perhaps the spoken word in which she was so apt to have the advantage, perhaps recalling the dependence of the community upon the store.

Nevertheless Griselda soon perceived Doris's change of allegiance, for she had come to depend upon the girl more and more. She had not expected such a thing to

happen, for Doris owed what education she had to Griselda. Moreover Griselda had recommended Doris to Minna Nordstaad as a cook one fall -- with the result that Engvald Nordstaad lost his opportunity of buying Miss Freddie's land.

Now Doris was turning against her, not openly, but subtly, in a host of ways hard to define. Griselda was not hurt. She had felt it her duty to do what she could for Doris in the past, but she had never really taken to the girl. Rather she was grimly amused by Doris's shufflings.

"Getting married went to her head!" she commented caustically. "She's got a lot to learn -- she'll come off it in a year or two!"

And more than ever convinced that what she required as an aide was a woman who was not part of the district, Griselda looked around for a younger one to fill Doris's place when Doris should openly at last declare herself. Her first thought was of Victoria Hampton-Reid, the newcomer to the ranch. Maude Horner, a war-bride, had been an asset to the community -- why should not Victoria prove another? And Victoria would have the authority of superior education: a certain prestige.... There would be problems to overcome, of course, but if Victoria showed the right spirit it could be done....

Dick and Victoria Hampton-Reid had arrived at Rolling Slopes in April. Their coming aroused a curiosity in their neighbors that their manner did nothing to lessen.

The fanatical desire of old Mr. Hampton-Reid for privacy had been taken for granted by his neighbors. He was, they reasoned, elderly, an invalid, and as an ex-Mountie and a pioneer who pre-dated the Kerrigans, deserving of respect. His interests, once the initial struggle between rancher and homesteader had been conceded to the latter, did not conflict with theirs. In fact he often bought cattle feed from local farmers who had a surplus, and when mange threatened the cattle, those from the farms were dipped at the ranch.

However the new owners of the Grasmere ranch were no less reserved than their uncle without his sound reasons for being so. They were young and apparently able-bodied. As strangers to the country it behooved them to show a proper respect to those who were established there -- if needful to ask and take their advice. This was the line of reasoning prevalent at Rolling Slopes in various degrees: to those who held it, the conduct of Dick and Victoria was an utter enigma and at times a serious affront. For they showed no tendency whatsoever to 'mix' or be 'sociable'; they adhered stubbornly to their own opinions, and, above all, they spoke with an English accent that was far too cultured to be sincere...

Of these errors and omissions, the offenders

themselves were unaware. Victoria came in time to have an uneasy sense that the women she pitied for the poverty of their lives were equally inclined to pity her. Dick never did quite realize what was the barrier that separated him from the farmers.

Shortly after the young couple arrived at the ranch, Griselda called there. Dick and Victoria were away, and Lee Wong explained that they had "Gone liding -- all lound.."

Griselda left a note with an invitation to tea, and two weeks later the Hampton-Reids arrived. They came on horseback, and that alone stamped them as eccentric. People who owned a fine automobile, and preferred to ride horseback...

Griselda met them at the door, splendid in her Sunday silk. Victoria, who had abandoned formal riding gear for a cooler garb of white cotton shirt, short riding-skirt, and shady hat was instantly conscious of her costume.

"A state occasion!" she thought, subduing the inclination to apologize for her informality. Her hostess ushered them into the parlor, a very different room from that in which the meeting of 1909 had been held. This room was long and narrow with dark-stained, highly varnished woodwork and doors, a glittering waxed linoleum floor, and heavily embossed wallpaper. The tall, narrow windows were

curtained in a brownish lace, there were scarlet geraniums in the plant-stand and a great leafy fern in a shady corner. The polished dining-room suite at one end showed that this room did double duty as dining-room and parlor. It was clean, crowded, and old fashioned: the furniture and windows had a perpendicular primness, the pictures, framed in heavy gilt, were uniformly hideous.

Victoria was fascinated, a little amused at the prevailing decor.

"It reminds me of Dickens," she said to her husband later. "I don't know why -- the houses in his books were always dark."

"It suits her," said Dick. "When I was here before they lived in a place with three or four tiny rooms, and she used to bustle back and forth across the kitchen about twice a minute. You'd think she'd wear a groove in the floor!"

"Did she work in the store?"

"Not much. Uncle Rupert said she wasn't good for business-- she hurried people too much. Instead of sitting around talking and then buying half a dozen things, they bought the first two they thought of, and went straight home because she made them feel so dreadfully idle!"

Victoria laughed. "Mr. Kerrigan's nice, isn't he?"

The situation at the tea party had eased somewhat when Jasper arrived from the store. Griselda had, with her

usual directness, brought up the matter that was on her mind at the moment: the Sunday School.

"We wondered if Mrs. Hampton-Reid would take a class for a few months. Mrs. Horner isn't very well, and it's a class of little girls."

"Oh!" Victoria looked at her husband for aid, but he was examining a seashell, a twisted and contorted product of tropical waters that had come from Nova Scotia with Griselda thirty years before.

"I say," he observed, "I remember this when I was here before. Did they ever catch that rustler -- that -- what's-his-name-- Steve, that we all went looking for that morning?"

Griselda laughed. "No one ever heard a thing of Steve from that day to this. Clean disappeared -- he was a bad one!"

She turned back to Victoria, who collected herself and delivered a polite refusal. Undaunted, her hostess returned to the attack.

"It's not denominational, you know. There's Church of England and Presbyterians and Methodists come to it..."

Victoria stubbornly reiterated her refusal. Repeated, it lost some of its tact, and a slight chill pervaded the atmosphere. That was the moment Jasper came in, and reinforced by his genial presence, the teaparty resumed cordiality.

"She's a pretty girl," said Mr. Kerrigan with approval after the guests left. "A very pretty girl!"

"She's well enough in looks," admitted his wife. "But she's not easy to get along with -- proud. Now the Captain's a nice boy -- just like he used to be. Well mannered."

"In fact," mused Mr. Kerrigan, "she's a beauty."

"Tcha!"

"Always did like that style myself," continued Jasper. "Dark eyes an' lots of black hair. Reminds me a lot of you when you was a girl!"

Griselda, who had been slowly swelling with indignation at the prolonged paean of praise, collapsed, murmuring in mollified tones,

"Oh, I never was <u>that</u> good-looking. She's got a lovely white skin."

"Not enough color!" said her husband briskly. "Dark-eyed girls should have rosy cheeks..."

"Well, I wish she'd have seen her way clear to giving us a hand with the Sunday School until Maude has had her baby! I don't know who to ask."

"Mabel!" said her husband.

"Mabel!" Griselda was deliberately putting Mabel out of her mind as much as possible these days. She smothered

the inclination to 'snap Jasper's head off', as she phrased it, and said calmly,

"I don't think Mabel could manage it."

"Good God,woman! What managing is there to a class of five or six little girls? Give Mabel a chance at this, anyway."

He sounded genuinely annoyed.

Had he emphasized the this? Griselda was not sure. She said no more on the subject, set her lips firmly and went about the preparation of supper, but Jasper's advice stayed with her. Two days later Mabel Wilkie came to the store, and Griselda asked her if she would take over Mrs. Horner's class for several months. Mabel did so with entire success: later in the summer she was elected Vice-President of the Ladies' Aid, and Griselda was forced to revise her estimate of Mabel's capability.

Although the Hampton-Reids stayed the summer on the ranch, Griselda saw little more of them until August. Then Lee Wong, who had been old Mr. Hampton-Reid's cook for years, abruptly announced that he was quitting and no amount of persuasion could induce him to stay. He reiterated, "Go home -- back to China!" and within the week had gone. Harvest was approaching, and not a cook was to be found. Victoria, who had plenty of energy, attacked the problem

herself and handled the housekeeping without trouble. Her year of V.A.D. work in the war helped her here, but it offered no clue to solving the question of cooking. The stove in the lean-to kitchen at the back of the ranch house would do nothing for Victoria, despite the flaky pastries and good bread it had turned out for Lee Wong.

In utter desperation, she appealed to Mr. Kerrigan when he came to the ranch one day.

"Burned out!" said the storekeeper after investigating. "I'll bring my wife over."

He did so, and Griselda in turn inspected the stove and pronounced its doom.

"It's done -- you'll never get on to the way of it. Ought to been thrown out years ago -- goodness knows how old Lee ever got it to cook! Better get a new one, an' I'll write you out some easy recipes."

She did so, and within a week Victoria had a new stove and could see some results for her work. Griselda lost some of her first animosity towards the girl when she saw how she made the best of a difficult situation, cooking all fall for three and sometimes four men.

Victoria herself bore with it fairly cheerfully. She hated the ranch for its loneliness, and the leaseland for a barren waste. The summer was hot and dry: the hills turned brown early and seemed more desert-like than ever. Only one thing kept her content -- the steady improvement

in her husband's health.

For Dick, wounded only once and that slightly in his four years of war, had received other and more serious hurt. He returned subject to blank-eyed moods of silence and dejection that seemed to run a set course and could not be broken into. Victoria suspected they covered the turning-over of dreadful recollections: she could not be sure, because he would not talk during them, or about them. For the duration of such moods he withdrew completely into himself, emerging with a puzzled, questioning look as though he wondered why he existed at all.

But his absorption in the ranch seemed to have helped these moods: there had been little evidence of them in the months since they came. So Victoria accepted the improved state of affairs with an inner thankfulness. She thought of their life on the ranch as an interlude -- a period of indefinite length that would improve Dick's health, perhaps cure him. Then their real life in Canada would begin. Where and how, she did not know, perhaps at the coast, where they had property and she had relatives, and everyone said it was so like England. She never thought seriously of living on the ranch: Griselda's calm assumption that she would do so had come as a shock, and had been in part responsible for her abrupt refusal to help with the Sunday School.

"I couldn't live here," she reflected. "I'd disintegrate - I've nothing in common with these women and the way they live. No books, no newspapers worth reading, no music.. What kind of education do these children get, leaving school at fourteen and fifteen. Suppose we had a child?"

Her meditations often broke off there with a sigh. After five years of marriage, she had almost given up hoping for a child. She envied the farm women -- the same that she pitied -- when she saw them in the distance, moving around the farmyard, or driving along the roads with two or three or four sturdy youngsters.

So for that summer, her life stood still. She was in a backwater, washed up for the time being in this isolation.

Griselda was disappointed with the results of her negotiations with Victoria. Rolling Slopes and its welfare had become so much a part of her that she did not recognize in the younger woman's desperate determination not to remain there, an echo of her own resentment of fifteen years earlier. Neither woman realized that the other's attitude was rooted in the same feeling as her own: the refusal to accept the prairie on its own terms. But where Victoria's alternative was flight, Griselda's was the unceasing struggle towards change.

THE OPPOSITION

Between 1921 and 1925 the machine age established itself upon the Alberta prairies. The steam-powered threshing machines that had been in use during the first harvests at Rolling Slopes made way for their counterparts that ran on gasoline. Dave Wilkie and Engvald Nordstaad bought the first tractors seen at Rolling Slopes: other farmers followed suit during the boom years of the '20's until very few continued to work their land with horses. Automobiles and farm trucks became common, and the network of roads spread, filled in the thirty miles of rolling prairie between Maverick and Rolling Slopes. A new, straight, graded road

had replaced the old winding trail, used for nearly half a century by the cattlemen and their herds, and perhaps for countless years before that by the Indians and the long-dead buffalo.

Rolling Slopes rejoiced at the introduction of the automobiles, and welcomed the labor-saving motor age. For the long-awaited railroad did not reach the village until 1925: ten years too late. Had it arrived in 1915, Griselda might have seen the neat prairie town of her dreams, clinging like so many of its fellows to the track that was the lifeline of their existence. The town would have grown and spread, for all who lived in and around it would have been utterly dependent upon the railroad.

However the automobile came first, and Rolling Slopes ceased to grow. No longer was the community so closely knit as it had been: it was continually drawn towards Maverick and out of itself. Thirty miles of prairie shrank to an hour's drive by automobile. The country on the fringes of farmland was no longer isolated. A telephone line linked Maverick with the store and the ranch: there were two or three radios in the district.

A branch line of rail from Maverick started in 1924, crawled snail-like across the few miles of flat prairie, turned westward and entered the hills. It was within ten

miles of Rolling Slope when construction work closed down that year.

The site of the last big camp became for a time a thriving prairie town -- Bell Creek, whose mushroom growth was watched with amazement and horror by the Kerrigans, who had hoped that Rolling Slopes would get the bustle and the business. Others, who lived east of Rolling Slopes, found the booming of Bell Creek very convenient, especially when a grain elevator was erected that summer and the thirty-mile haul to Maverick became a thing of the past. Bell Creek at its zenith had a bank, a post-office, a small school, and two stores. It had a church, and a large hall that bade fair to rival the U.F.A. hall at Rolling Slopes, erected about the same time. For a time Bell Creek threatened to run its old-established neighbor out of business.

But a year saw the peak of prosperity there pass. In the spring of 1925, the camp, with its noise and bustle, its rows of tents, its trucks and teams and wagons and piles of ties, moved on, to spend a few weeks at Rolling Slopes and then move on again to the west. Bell Creek shrivelled to a post-office, an elevator and a name on the newly-printed maps. Its hastily-erected frame buildings fell vacant, stood empty with the dry prairie wind warping the unpainted lumber, whistling around the boarded-up windows,

until most of it was sold, dismantled and hauled away. The Bell Creek church survived, and the grain elevator, and a length of narrow wooden sidewalk that crumbled away with time and was finally stolen in sections for firewood during the depression.

Before it reached Rolling Slopes, the railway line crossed Dave Wilkie's farm, and Henry Burton's, and passed a hundred yards north of the store to enter the lease. At that point the grain elevators were erected. Their towering height made them a landmark. The site of the village was now evident for miles around. Even from the secluded ranch-house the square tops of the elevators were visible, an ever-present reminder to the Hampton-Reids of their helplessness in a machine age.

Dick Hampton-Reid bitterly protested the driving of the railway line across the lease, but existing legislation favored the railways, and he was powerless to prevent the amputation of the southern wedge of his range. True, he gained in shipping facilities right at hand, but the fact did not reconcile him. His opposition to what they considered their best interests exasperated the farmers and they were less inclined than ever to be friendly towards him.

In 1925 Rolling Slopes still consisted of Kerrigan's store that dealt in groceries, hardware, and dry goods, and was likewise the post-office and the filling-station. A couple

of sheds were appended to the store, and a small new building at the left housed the barrels of gasoline and oil. South of that again was Joe Griggs' little shack, now neatly painted, with the blacksmith's shop nearby. Joe did little blacksmithing now: Lady and Mike had long since disappeared from his stable to be replaced by a brown team called Bob and Sally. Joe still hauled freight, but only from the siding near the elevators. He worked on Kerrigan's farm a good deal, for Walter had largely taken over the store. Mr. Kerrigan spent little time there save in the mornings. Joe was not of much use around the store: he was very slow, and at dispensing gas and oil he was quite hopeless. He could not get used to cars and tractors, although trains fascinated him and figured largely in the endless stories he told to whoever would listen.

In spite of the material progress of Rolling Slopes, the years between 1920 and 1925 were not, on the whole, happy ones for Griselda. The preceding decade had seen many of her earlier hopes realized: she had a settled home, she had watched the growth of a thriving community to which her own contributions had been large and successful. If her daughter's early marriage had disappointed her, she was now reconciled to it. Henry Burton, a prosperous farmer, was a good husband and father, and Emma a happy woman. The

business of Kerrigan and Son was equally satisfactory, and Jasper spoke often of their trip east.

"Bit late," he would say cheerfully, "but in a year or two...."

Outwardly Griselda had every reason to be content with her life, but she was not. A vague uneasiness troubled her that would not be defined -- could not be analyzed. Uncertainty, doubt, self-questioning: these were some of the elements in it, and Griselda, usually so sure of herself and of her motives, was plagued by them.

The worst of it was that she could not locate the source of her doubt or uncertainty. There had, in the past, been specific causes: Mabel Prescott was one such. If at any time after 1922, Griselda had been asked if she regretted her three-year silent campaign against Mabel, she would have admitted she did. But no one asked her: she had no intimates, and Jasper rarely reverted to the past in his talks with his wife. His life was the present and the future: his philosophy an uncomplicated one. The present he lived as comfortably for all concerned as was compatible with common sense and morality: the future, he anticipated with optimism.

If Griselda's uneasiness had a source, it was impossible to locate. Rather, it was in the air: a difference

in outlook, a new attitude that pervaded every aspect of life. Almost as soon as she stepped out of the tall white house, Griselda was aware of change, of unfamiliar noise, of hustle and bustle and a passion for speed: in short, of a younger generation that was strange to her, although she had watched them grow up. Sadly perplexed, she began to wonder how the change had come about. She understood their parents well enough: the hard-working farmers who came from England and Iowa and Norway and Ontario and Ireland and Bavaria. They were perfectly intelligible. They had purpose, they labored, and deserved what reward they got, and were, it had always seemed in the past, thrifty with money that took long to earn. People like the Prices were intelligible to Griselda. Price did have hard luck, year after year, and that made him suspicious and complaining. And Mrs. Price, too, with her flock of children and a grumbling husband. ..No wonder she was worried and inefficient: a borrower, always apologizing.

But how did people come to have the children they did? This settlement, like most of the prairie settlements, had started from scratch. People came to a new land, one almost without tradition. It was not like the northern bush settlements, where, since the days of the earliest explorers, there had been a tradition of white men living with brown-skinned women: where the fact was simply taken for granted.

A younger generation there belonged nowhere -- the social gradient led down and down, back to the level of the native...

The furrow between Griselda's black brows was deep when she came to this stage in her thinking. She had been so relieved to leave behind her the north and its problems, to get her children out into a life where she, personally, could keep her civilization unimpeded, and, perhaps, with the help of others. At Rolling Slopes, she had set the standards, and had, with pleasure, seen how others coming in, accepted and conformed. Setbacks she had had, and overcome them. Disappointments too -- and who could expect to live a life free of disappointment? But on the whole, the level had been maintained, even raised, with the cooperation of most of the community. And now, just when things were going so well and people were winning to a prosperity they deserved, their own children seemed determined to tear down all that had been accomplished.

There was, for instance, Eileen Price. Eileen Fay-- who had been the first baby born at Rolling Slopes. Griselda shook her head at thought of Eileen. Af fifteen, running around the country in Ches Meade's rattletrap Ford. At sixteen, rouged and painted, noisy at the dances, surrounded by men.. And not the local boys, either, but the transients from threshing crews, and the railway construction camp. What would

Eileen be at seventeen, eighteen...? What was she now? A mere painted doll, with round, bold, light-blue eyes under thin, pencilled brows and fair short hair, touched up to make it impossibly golden, done in a row of little curls across the brow? A brittle, tinselly prettiness, an all-consuming restlessness, a bundle of disconnected emotions with no controlling will? All these, apparently, to judge from the girl herself, sitting on the counter in the store with her brief skirts everywhich way, singing in her sweet little voice the tawdry songs of the time,

"I ain't nobody's darlin'
I'm as blue as can be,
'Cause I ain't got nobody
To make a fuss over me.
If I don't get somebody,
I'm going back to the farm
To milk the cows and chickens
For I don't give a good gosh darn!"

All these and little more, to judge from the complaints of her family. Doris presumed upon her married status to lecture her mother about Eileen's conduct.

"You never used to let me get away with things like that, Ma! Out till two and three in the morning with those fellows from Maverick!"

But she said as much to Mrs. Price in the store one day, and Ches Meade rose to Eileen's defence.

"Don't seem to remember what fellows wanted to keep you out till two an' three in the morning, Dorrie?

Anyone I know?"

He stood waiting with spurious interest for Doris to reply, and the sly, mocking glimmer of his malicious grin began to spread over his face as Doris reddened with anger. Eileen laughed, ignoring her mother's rebuke. Certainly Eileen was a problem, always trying to keep up with her friends at Maverick who were trying desperately to keep up with their friends in the city. Their philosophy - all of them - the words of their cheap, silly songs - "Cause I don't give a good gosh darn!" And others of Eileen's age or younger at Rolling Slopes tried to keep up with Eileen. Their parents did not approve of Eileen...nor of the company she kept: the railroad construction men, Ches Meade...

Ches Meade. What of Ches? thought Griselda. Ches was back from his homesteading jaunt to the Peace River. Much improved, no doubt, in his ability to do a steady day's work, more assured. Far too assured... And what business had Ches, at twenty-four, to be running around with a fifteen-year-old Eileen? These differences in ages were characteristic of the newly-settled bush or prairie.... Henry Burton was seven or eight years older than Emma... Very common in the bush settlements, where bachelor homesteaders waited for the daughters of their neighbors to grow up to fifteen or sixteen and then married them... But Rolling Slopes was well-settled: there were plenty of girls of eighteen and twenty who would be more suited to Ches. Griselda reflected that

perhaps those older girls had more sense. Obviously, Eileen had not, yet she refused to be guided by her parents.

Ches and Eileen, and the others.. Different. Where had it all started? Griselda could not recall. The difference had not been there when Walter and Emma were younger -- then, suddenly it had been. Not only the young people were different. Many of the others -- the late comers to the district -- were different too. Griselda was inclined to blame the coming of the railway construction crew for some or most of the laxness: certainly Prohibition had not been the blessing it was intended to be. With people like the Cottles about, what could you expect? But then, did conditions create the Cottles and their like, or did the Cottles create conditions? Griselda never solved this conundrum to her own satisfaction after Jasper put it to her one day. She shelved it to think about later, and it remained unanswered, adding to her doubts whenever she remembered it. On one point only she was quite clear: the Cottles were extremely unsavory citizens of Rolling Slopes, and their going would solve many problems. For a time, while she concentrated on the Cottles, Griselda believed it would solve all of them.

The Cottles were comparatively recent comers, arriving about 1921 to settle on a quarter near the Burtons,

and south-east of the store. The road out to Maverick ran between their house and the Burtons. For over a year the Cottles came and went in the district without causing much comment. Mr. Cottle was a loud-voiced, square-set individual with a nose that had been broken in the distant past, and never properly set. From the beginning he was loud in his denunciation of prairie farms. He borrowed machinery from his neighbors and was careless about repairing and returning it. On the whole, he was no asset to the community.

For these and other reasons, the neighbors pitied his wife. She rarely went out with her husband on his frequent jaunts to Bell Creek, Maverick, and more distant points, and, since after 1922 word soon got around that Cottle's real business was bootlegging, her disassociation from her husband's activities was a point in her favor. A stout near-blonde with a husky voice and a ready laugh, Mrs. Cottle was genuinely likeable. She joined the Women's Institute and the Ladies' Aid (although she never went to church), and revealed an aptitude for knitting and sewing that was the envy of less gifted women. She was moreover a good cook. Her inclination to snuggle up close to her neighbor at a sewing circle,or to a bystander in the store, and tell a broad joke was deplored by some, but on the whole Mrs. Cottle was taken for what she was: a good-natured,

blowsy, rather coarse woman who made the best of a bad job at home, and brought up her daughter well.

The Cottles had but one child, a thin, shy, big-eyed girl of thirteen or fourteen: Leona. She was scared to death of her father and very fond of her mother, Emma Burton reported. Emma had opportunity to see a good deal of the Cottles for they lived just across the road from Henry Burton's neat farm. Mrs. Cottle often ran over to visit with Emma: the latter did not make as many calls on her neighbor because she heartily disliked the man of the house. Mrs. Cottle seemed to understand: she was sometimes embarrassingly frank about her marital difficulties.

In the summer of 1922 the ladies of Rolling Slopes held a quilting bee at Emma Burton's. The quilt was destined for Doris Price, soon to become Doris Evans, and the group that stood around it at two o'clock that afternoon were discussing the pattern to be followed in the quilting.

"Just follow the seams," suggested Emma.

"Probably be all right," agreed Griselda. "The pieces are small enough, I guess. You need a pattern in the corners."

"Mark out a fan in circles with the edge of a saucer," said Mrs. Price, and Emma went to fetch the saucer and a pencil. The others, including Maude Horner, seated

themselves around the edges of the quilting frame and began to thread needles. Emma's voice came to them,

"Hello, there, Mrs. Cottle! I'm glad you could make it. Come in."

"Am I late?"

Emma broke in on Mrs. Cottle's husky tones,

"My goodness! Your eye...!"

"Yes," said the other flatly. "Cottle -- las' night after he got back from town."

She entered the front room, greeted the others casually, and went to deposit her hat in the bedroom, leaving in her rear a stricken circle around the quilt, whom the sight of her black eye had silenced.

"Pass the thread, Maude!" Griselda broke the spell, and Mrs. Cottle squeezed into the circle. Mabel Wilkie and Minna Nordstaad arrived, and Emma met them on the step to caution them not to mention the black eye. The quilting went on rapidly, until, when lunch was served, there was only a small patch in the middle to complete.

"I'll do that myself tomorrow," said Emma as the party dispersed.

"Maybe I'll run over and give you a hand," said Mrs. Cottle. She glanced out the window. "I better go. There's Leona now."

Leona, now fifteen but looking younger, was still at school. Her mother, much against Cottle's wishes, insisted on the girl's attendance, although Leona was not clever. She slid off her pony at the gate and rapped timidly on the kitchen door.

"Is Mother there, Mrs. Burton?"

"I'm coming, Leona!" Mrs. Cottle hurried out, calling hasty good-byes over her fat shoulder. Behind her the expressions of sympathy were profuse. Even Griselda, who had never liked Mrs. Cottle's free-and-easy ways, was moved.

During 1924, while the railway line crept out from Maverick, Mr. Cottle did a thriving business with the camp. He joined forces with the Bell Creek bootlegger and for some months his comings and goings were erratic in the extreme. In the fall of that year he went on one of his long jaunts and did not return. Mrs. Cottle was philosophically unconcerned: when, in an heroic attempt to keep the tactful fiction that the Cottle menage was of the ordinary type, Mrs. Horner asked, "When do you expect Mr. Cottle back?" Mrs. Cottle replied, nonchalantly: "I don't! I expect he's found greener pastures." She went her way unconcerned, leaving Mrs. Horner in speechless confusion.

The Cottle farm, on which Mr. Cottle had paid little or nothing during his three years of occupancy, was subsequently rented to Dave Wilke, and Mrs. Cottle and Leona stayed on in the shabby little house with no visible means of support but two milk cows and a few chickens and turkeys. That fall, Mrs. Cottle cooked on Burton's threshing gang, and Henry told his wife,

"Never had such a good cook. But she sure don't mind how she talks to the men!"

Leona Cottle still attended school regularly, grew less scared, more confident. She developed a shy, appealing prettiness, and her mother was very strict with her. Over the summers she had been doing housework, and the women who employed her, including Emma Burton, spoke well of her. She was neat, willing, and good with children. Her only ~~one~~ fault, in fact, was a lack of initiative.

However under the circumstances this was scarcely a fault. Mrs. Cottle was steadily going from bad to worse. She declined a good job as cook in the Prairie Vista Hotel in Maverick, electing rather to stay on in the little house on the farm. That she was carrying on her husband's bootlegging was easily apparent. The untidy little shack seemed a rendezvous for all kinds of nocturnal callers. And more than once Henry Burton, routed out of bed after midnight

by a peremptory knocking, discovered one of Mrs. Cottle's customers on the step.

"Want two!" demanded the first of these unwelcome visitors, swaying gently as he stood.

"Two what?" asked Henry sharply.

"WAnt two!" muttered the man thickly, holding out a bill.

And as Henry stared at him, a voice from the car parked outside the house gate, called urgently,

"Mel! It's the wrong place -- c'mon! Mel!"

"Oh, sorry!" muttered the man who wanted two. "Wrong place -- wrong place -- very sorry...!"

And the car proceeded to turn in at the lane leading to Mrs. Cottle's home.

Such visitors were rarely identified. Many of them were from the construction camps, and from Maverick, or further. A few were local. Ches Meade was among them. Mrs. Cottle was accustomed to tell him all her choicest jokes in the store, and he was seen passing the store late at night on horseback. Flushed, hilarious, husky-voiced, Mrs. Cottle went to all the dances in the new hall. She never left alone.

Leona quit school sometime before these happenings, and went to work for a farmer's wife near Maverick. She

rarely came home. After that, Mrs. Cottle really let herself go. The railway had reached Bell Creek, and all that winter, the little town boomed. Mrs. Cottle ran a thriving 'blind pig': it was assumed that not all her visitors went there for liquid refreshment. She dressed flashily now, paid up her bills regularly at the store, and would spend the afternoon there, talking, laughing, telling her ribald jests to Ches Meade, who haw-hawed loudly, grinning from ear to ear, to Joe Griggs, who would turn scarlet and back away, stuttering and embarrassed, or to any and all of the railway workers, who often came to the store at Rolling Slopes. But with the Kerrigans, father and son, she adopted no such familiar tone.

Mrs. Kerrigan watched this situation develop with increasing irritation. Mrs. Cottle, from an object of pity, had progressed to become the plague-spot of Rolling Slopes. Worse, she would not admit she was a plague spot, did not, in fact, even realize her outrageous conduct. Her charity outshone that of all her virtuous neighbors. She donated ten pounds of candy to the school Christmas treat, she knitted a dozen pairs of gay mittens for the bundles for the Salvation Army, and she sent half-a-dozen excellent pies to the sale of home cooking for the W.I.

The continual flaunting of the wages of sin in full view of the community and of impressionable youth was

too much for Griselda. And when Mrs. Cottle's offer to make and contribute two pairs of lace-edged pillow-slips and three aprons for the church bazaar was relayed to the Ladies' Aid meeting along with an apology for not attending in person, Griselda rose in wrath.

"Either that woman stays away from meetings or I resign! She's a disgrace to the community, and how she can be so brazen as to live the life she does and then expect to be welcomed by decent people, I don't know..."

There was a murmur of assent from the assembled ladies, and the ultimatum was relayed to Mrs. Cottle. She strolled over the road to visit Emma Burton.

"I hear your Ma's on the war path 'bout me an' my pillow-slips, Emma. That so? My, it's a warm day, ain't it?"

She seemed in good mood: one reason for her affability was increasingly evident in the warm kitchen where she sat overflowing a small wooden chair. Emma admitted that Griselda was opposed to Mrs. Cottle's course of action, and the latter nodded without rancour.

"Tha's what I hear..." Her head sunk for a moment, then she wakened with a jerk and seemed quite sober for the next remark.

"I don't know as I blame your Ma, Emma. She works hard for this community, an' not many appreciate it. Folk

don't as a rule. They rather go to hell on their own than be dragged to Heaven by someone better'n themselves..."

"What shall I say about the pillow-cases?" demanded Emma, for her guest seemed again on the verge of sleep. She swayed ever so little back and forth on the creaking chair, and her plump curves quivered like jelly. She blinked and surveyed Emma with a mild surprise.

"Pillow-cases? Oh, drat, now -- what was I goin' to do about them pillow-cases? Oh, yes -- I'll do 'em an' send ' em over to you, Emma. You slip 'em into the pile on the quiet. What your Ma don't know, won't hurt her, and the bazaar can do with the money, hey?"

She winked as one conspirator to another, and levered herself to her feet with one fat hand gripping the solid window-sill.

"You're easier to get on with than your Ma, Emma. But she's a good woman -- she does good in her way an' I do it in mine. You tell her that the next time she sounds off about me! Guess I better be goin' home..."

For several months after that, the whole matter hung fire. Mrs. Cottle obligingly stayed away from Ladies' Aid meetings, but she evidently considered herself a member. She gave her donations to Emma who put them aside for the bazaar without saying anything about them. Griselda likewise, as was her wont, said nothing, waiting for the other side

to make the next move. Eventually her patience was rewarded.

Late in the fall, Leona Cottle arrived at Kerrigans one Sunday evening, red-eyed and tearful.

Mrs. Kerrigan, will you come an' see Mother? She wants to see you awful bad!

Griselda was taken aback. Such demands on her, common a few years earlier in cases of illness, had been rare of late years.

"Is your mother ill?" she demanded.

The girl began to sob wildly. "Please come," she begged. "Please come!"

Griselda attempted to find out more about Mrs. Cottle, but Leona was in no state to clear up the confusion. She seemed almost hysterical, and the boy who had driven her over, a shy, quiet, gangling lad in his early twenties, stood silent and embarrassed by the door. Griselda recognized him for one of the sons of the family where Leona had been working for the last year.

"I don't know what to do," she complained aside to Jasper.

"Better go," he counselled. "I'll drive you over. These kids can stay here, or go over to Emma's, or come with us.

Leona and her escort elected to remain where they were. Griselda glimpsed them as she drove away. They sat

very still and close together in the cab of the truck, Leona wiping her eyes, the lad staring straight ahead of him with ferocious concentration upon nothing.

"What can it all be about?" fumed Griselda.

"Looks to me like Mrs. Cottle's got to make up her mind to lose Leona for good an' all,"said Jasper shrewdly.

Mrs. Cottle was sitting alone in her kitchen when Griselda rapped at the door. She was not ill, but she was very drunk. At sight of the bulging figure in the sloppy blue kimono, Jasper discreetly withdrew. Griselda held her ground although the atmosphere of the kitchen sickened her.

"Leona asked me to come," she said impersonally. "Are you ill?"

Mrs. Cottle stated at her, pushed back the hair from her puffy face and shook her head once or twice.

"Yeah!" she said thickly, "wanted to see you... wanted see you...wait a minute...make some coffee..."

She heaved herself to her feet, waddled over to the stove and picked up the coffee pot. It hung unsteadily in her hand, a trickle of coffee dribbled to the floor. Griselda was disgusted, but it did not occur to her to leave. She took the coffee-pot from the flabby hand.

"Sit down," she said sharply. "I'll make it."

"Top cupboard," muttered Mrs. Cottle, and flopped into her chair once more, head on hands.

"Shouldn't do it," she mumbled. "Should'nt drink now -- my God! What a headache!"

"Why don't you stop?" Griselda stabbed at the fire, set the coffee-pot over the flames.

"Me? On the water-wagon?" Mrs. Cottle gave a strident hoot of laughter, shook her head. "Couldn't do it - not now. Tried before -- stopped for six years... not now..."

Jasper rapped timidly on the door, beckoned to his wife.

"I'll wait in the car," he whispered.

Mrs. Cottle's raucous laughter filled the room. "Ain't you afraid someone'll see him sitting outside my house..." She was suddenly serious,

"Guess they'd know the rights of it if they did. Everybody knows how he thinks the sun rises 'round you...if I'd had your chance -- good man like you've got--different..."

Griselda's disgust was mixed with pity for the sodden, hopeless creature before her. "You've got Leona," she said gently, and heard with relief the bubbling of the coffee on the stove.

The other looked up with an effort at concentration.

"Leona!" she said quite clearly. "Never stuck to him if it wasn't for Leona. Stayed six years -- not my kid: Cottle's. Glad I never married him--could've...at first!"

Griselda nearly dropped the coffee-pot.

"Married!" she gasped.

"No," said Mrs. Cottle with an air of great patience. "I wouldn't marry a man like Cottle -- after all, I got some self-respect! But I stayed to bring up the kid -- wish she was mine!"

Griselda turned mechanically to the cupboard to seek a cup. She turned with it to find Mrs. Cottle's eye fixed on her with an unexpected twinkle in its bleary depths.

"They're clean!" she said. "All clean -- Leona's been here all weekend --cleaned me up -- she's a good girl. Too good to come here any more. B'sides, I don't want my girl mixed up with that Eileen Price, an' that gang!"

Griselda pushed the cup of coffee across the table to her.

"Drink that -- now, what about Leona?"

"Want to talk to you about Leona," said Mrs. Cottle. "Sit down -- have a cuppa coffee."

Griselda sat as invited. In spite of the woman's repulsive aspect, in spite of the untidy kitchen that symbolized Mrs. Cottle's rapid decay from the neat housekeeper she had been but three years before, she was drawn to Mrs. Cottle as never before. Mrs. Cottle struggled out of her torpor, and spoke more fluently.

"Never thought you'd be sittin' here havin' a cup

of coffee with me, did you? I'd offer Mr. Kerrigan one too, but I wanta talk to you alone just now."

She sipped, frowning, and went on,

"I'll make a bargain with you -- you'd like to see me gone, hey?"

Her tone was factual, not truculent: there was almost a glint of fun in her little blue eyes.

"You got this district all sewed up to go the way you want it -- church, Sunday School, Ladies' Aid, the Club-Everybody but us no-goods, me'n Ches Meade, an' Old Bill -- not that he's any pal o' mine, but I notice he don't play on your side of the fence neither. Folks don't hardly dare wipe their noses 'thout asking Ma Kerrigan! Me, I think it's all right -- you done a lot for Rolling Slopes in your time. An' you live your life the way you want it, an' I'll live mine."

Griselda answered with spirit. 'Ma Kerrigan' indeed!

"I don't care how you live so long as it's your life. But when it hurts other people -- I'm thinking of the name you give the community an' the example you set to the youngsters. How do you suppose Leona feels about you?"

The shaft told. In fact, for the moment it killed Mrs. Cottle's lucidity.

"Don' blame you," she muttered vaguely, her eyes filling. "Have some cream in your coffee -- it's all right -- Leona washed the separator this morning... What was I saying?

Oh, yes -- Leona..."

She gulped the rest of the coffee, pushed her cup over for more, and continued.

"Make a bargain with you -- I'll get out -- right out of this district an' go a long way so's you'll never hear of me again. Soon -- next week, if you say the word..."

She looked cunningly at Griselda who sat watching, suddenly tense, her face like iron.

"I'll go," repeated Mrs. Cottle. "But I want you to take Leona up. She wants to marry that boy -- that young Vernon -- but his folks ain't happy about it. Can't say as I blame 'em. Long as Leona's associated with me, they'll kick. But if you take Leona over for a month or two -- you talk to Mrs. Vernon an' tell her Leona's on the level an' always was -- an' see that the district gives her a nice send-off, like they done for Doris Price. A shower from the Club an' a nice quilt made for her and you to back her up -- it'll be O.K. for the kid."

She looked sharply at Griselda. "That's my bargain-- I'll get out for good, an' you see that the kid gets a nice send-off, so she can be proud of her weddin'. He's got his own land out here, an' they like Leona all right. Jest don't want her in the family, but they'll come 'round if I get out. People forget, an' she's not my kid -- that's one good thing. You can tell 'em that."

Again she seemed on the verge of tears, but blinked them away.

"Well -- that's my bargain. Take it or leave it?"

Griselda sat silent. She would never have allowed an exception to be made of Leona Cottle, as Mrs. Cottle evidently feared. Leona would have had her shower and her quilt regardless. But if Mrs. Cottle left, it would be better for Leona, better for Rolling Slopes, might even still the current of unrest that was unsettling the district, especially the younger members... That Mrs. Cottle should thus bargain, attempting to bribe Griselda by the promise of the removal of her unsavory presence, was subtly insulting. Did Mrs. Cottle mean it as an insult? Looking at her, gross, pitifully in earnest, Griselda thought not. She rose: she had the whip hand now, and she knew it. But she would not commit herself openly, nor descend to bargain.

"When Leona gets married," she said quietly, "she will have a shower like all the other girls, and be treated just the same by this community. We all like Leona and want to see her happy."

Suddenly, dreadfully, without warning, Mrs. Cottle burst into tears. Griselda fled, closing the screen door on the sound of the heaving sobs, thankful beyond expression for the clean, fresh air, the comforting presence of Jasper.

Something of what Mrs. Cottle had said added materially to the weight of her uneasiness,

"People don't dare wipe their noses 'thout askin' Ma Kerrigan!"

The mental picture of herself it evoked was not pleasant: a community resentful, but obedient, herself, dictatorial down to the smallest matters. It was not true--but was it what people really felt? She could not tell.

There was comfort in Mrs. Cottle's words as well as the seeds of self-doubt. What had she said of Jasper?

"Thinks the sun rises around you... a good man."

Driving home, Griselda was aware of a sudden rush of gratitude towards Jasper. He was so loyal. Where would she have been without him? In spite of the wandering years, Jasper had given her what she craved: an inner security, a sense of being needed, a consciousness that she was not alone in her undertakings.

When they reached the store, she spoke kindly to Leona and congratulated the shy young farmer. She had a feeling that Mrs. Cottle would be as good as her word, and so it proved. The railway construction camp broke up in November, and in the same week Mrs. Cottle vanished from Rolling Slopes. She left at the store a box of beautifully embroidered linens for Leona, but apparently made no attempt

to communicate with the girl. Leona Cottle was married that winter and received the usual community send-off. Emma Burton gave her a shower and Mr. Kerrigan gave the bride away at the wedding, which, although held in Maverick, was well attended by people from Rolling Slopes.

Leona's family by marriage received the girl well enough, and on the rare occasions when Griselda saw her henceforth she seemed perfectly happy. Of Mrs. Cottle no further news ever reached Rolling Slopes.

DEFEAT

However, Mrs. Cottle's going solved nothing, as Griselda found in the next year, unless it were the matter of Leona Cottle's future. The era of post-war prosperity was in fullest swing. Everyone had money, everyone was buying, spending lavishly and recklessly, taking trips "back home", investing in oil stocks, real estate...always counting on next year's crop to pay. Some of the older people were a little puzzled, a little bewildered at the speed of life. Their children were frankly delighted. They turned back eagerly towards the world that their parents had left behind when they settled the bare rangeland a few

years earlier, reached out greedily for all that that settlement had not yet attained in its mushroom growth.

Sometimes it seemed that all they craved was pleasure. Responsibility, serious effort, even the superficial good manners were not there, or had been forgotten. In 1925, Mrs. Price confided to Griselda her concern over her daughter.

"She won't listen to me -- I don't know what's got into these kids nowadays. I used to think she'd get over it in a year or so, but there's no reasoning with her. All she says is 'I've got a right to live my own life'!"

Griselda could almost hear Eileen's voice, that by nature was a silvery treble, endeavoring to sound mature and--and--what was their silly word they all used so much--modern, as she cried defiantly,

"I've got a right to live my own life!"

A right--

Thoughtfully she observed,

"These young ones have a lot to say about what's modern and what's their right, don't they?"

It was like turning on a tap. Words poured out of Mrs. Price.

"I don't understand them. Doris was such a good girl -- never a moment's trouble to me, an' such a help. An' this one! Always telling me I'm old fashioned, an' talking

about her right to be happy an' her right to live her own life, an' her right to do what all her friends do and go where they go.. Did we ever talk so much about our rights when we were young, Griselda?"

"No," said Griselda. "We knew we had to work for what we wanted, and people figured they had duties instead of rights... Or if they didn't they kept quiet!"

"What I want to know," lamented Mrs. Price, "is, whose idea is it all -- this stuff about being modern an' having rights to do everything they shouldn't?"

But Griselda could not enlighten her. "Sometimes I wonder," she admitted. "Seems like it's in the air. It's the times, I guess. Doesn't Eileen mind her father?"

"She does not!" There was surprise and consternation in Mrs. Price's voice: she herself had always obeyed Andy Price to the letter. "She even talks back to him. If ever I'd spoken to my father like that...!"

"I wonder if we could find her something to do in the club?" said Griselda. "We could let the seventeen-year olds in, and give them something to think about here in the district. That might stop some of this gadding about in cars!"

But Eileen Price, when she was formally invited to join the women's club, was scornful of the privilege.

"Me!" she said loudly as she read the written invitation in the store, "Me join the old ladies! Not on your life! Who thinks I'm going to sit around and knit when I can find something better to do? Tell your Ma I don't want to join, Walter!"

"Tell her yourself, Eileen," replied Walter, who was well aware that Eileen considered him an old stick-in-the-mud, and often said so. "Tell her yourself. All you got to do is walk out the back door and across the yard!"

For a moment the girl seemed about to accept the challenge. Then, feeling perhaps that her saucy defiance would meet more than its match, if she did, she tossed her little head with its burnished cap of short tinted hair, curling forward in two crescents on her round, painted cheeks.

"I don't care," she said petulantly. "I'll tell my mother to tell her. So there!"

And in due time, Mrs. Price apologetically delivered her daughter's refusal to Griselda. Eileen continued to run around the country with Ches Meade or one or another of the railroad men, noisy, chattering, uncontrollable as spilt quicksilver. She formed a sort of nucleus around which Griselda's sense of uneasiness collected itself. So much energy without a purpose, so much emotion without a controlling

sense of responsibility was dangerous, the older woman felt. But what could be done about it? If the girl's own parents could not control her, whose business was it? Griselda, always a member of the lunch committee at dances and socials, continued to see Eileen at all of them, always popular, always conspicuous, from the moment she entered the hall.

The hall itself had never meant as much to Griselda as the little frame schoolhouse had done, although she had worked equally hard towards the building of both. But the younger generation were unanimous in declaring the new hall to be the best thing that had happened in Rolling Slopes yet. Their elders were not so sure. They carried nostalgic memories of the crowded dances, parties and socials in the little school where everybody knew everybody else. The new hall was large: it had a good floor and a stage and a kitchen at the back of the stage. It was, with its high square front, lettered U.F.A. HALL -- ROLLING SLOPES, 1925, an imposing monument to the prosperity of a thriving farming community.

Ironically enough, as this symbol of the existence of the community came into being, the community itself was, in spirit, in danger of dissolution. The middle twenties were years of flux, farms were changing hands as their owners saw a chance to sell profitably, or to rent and take up residence

elsewhere. The constant nucleus of the district was a small group: the Horners, Nordstaads, Burtons, Wilkies, Prices, Kerrigans, Joe Griggs, and Ches Meade. For Ches, in spite of his constant coming-and-going, his continual investigation of new projects: the Peace River homesteads, the Turner Valley oilfields, the lumber camps in the foothills, kept his foothold in Rolling Slopes. Apart from the Kerrigans, Joe Griggs, and Old Bill Lilly, he had been at Rolling Slopes longer than anybody else. Few people realized the fact. Ches to most minds, was not a constant quantity but a drifter, restless and aimless as the wind, as the wild birds that came and went with the changing seasons.

In 1925, the population of Rolling Slopes was augmented by two elevator men and the sectionman and his family. Thereafter the elevator men changed every two or three years, but the Patchenkos had come to stay. Peter Patchenko was a bulky Ukranian, the history of whose family in the last two generations provided a fair epitome of the changing map of Europe. His mother, who lived with the family, had been born in Roumania, Peter himself had served in the Czar's army, the Roumanian village they had left had been occupied by Polish troops several times in recent years. The adult members of the family, having in memory the recollection of a disordered Europe, and having known

the government of Austria, Russia, Roumania and Poland, preferred the former, and venerated the memory of the old emperor, Franz Joseph.

History sat lightly upon Peter Patchenko after he came to Canada. He patrolled the track between Bell Creek (where a Swedish section foreman reluctantly took up his lonely abode) and a point some miles west of Rolling Slopes. With him arrived his wife, his mother, and his flock of dark-eyed, barefooted, brown-skinned children who spoke the oddest mixture of languages. The memory of Ukranian with its smatterings of Polish and Roumanian, faded in time, and the younger Patchenkos were fluent in English. But the two women of the household never did learn very much English beyond the conventional words of greeting and farewell. They lived quietly to themselves, rarely leaving the untidy, sprawling house beyond the tracks, where Peter added one lean-to after another to the box-car that had been the original home.

For a short time, until Mike, Young Peter, and Stephan found themselves conversant with English, they fared ill. But they learned fast: in their own interests, faced with Ches Meade and his jokes, they had to. In a few months they were able to cope with Ches's wit, and being easy-going, stolid youths, they forgave him and continued to tag around

with him until in a year or two they in turn got jobs on the railway.

Stephan and Annie and little Paul went to school where they proved good pupils, and unusually talented artists and actors. As the section-man's house was on the edge of the lease, the sturdy children wandered all over the grassland with a freedom that none of the farm children had ever dared to use.

They swam in the creek all summer and skated on it in winter if no slough lay closer at hand. Harry Wise warned them on several occasions to keep off: they disregarded the words they did not understand and, as they did no harm, he came to tolerate them. Once they came boldly to the ranch-house and told him of cows on the track, and after that they were permitted to roam at liberty. They even met Old Bill and passed by without signs of guilt or fear, and the former terror of the lease, like a savage old dog that does not bite the person who is not afraid, ignored them. But usually they did not penetrate to Old Bill's corner of the lease, considering that which lay between their home and the school as their particular property.

Living in this fashion, the Patchenkos did not really become a part of Rolling Slopes for many years. They held aloof, like the Hampton-Reids and Harry Wise, like Old Bill Lilly. The reserve was on both sides. There were those at

Rolling Slopes, who remarked, "bohunks", and ignored the newcomers. Others who made an effort to be friendly were baffled by the shyness of the peasant women, their broken English. But the younger children grew up among their playmates at school and held their own with credit in the games and at concerts and school fairs. Griselda spoke to their father about sending them to Sunday School, and, although the big boys never came, the family, from Annie down, attended regularly.

1925 was, on the whole, one of the most eventful years in the development of Rolling Slopes. It brought the railroad and the new hall: it established once and for all, so far as its inhabitants could see, the fact that the district was an integral part ofthe province as a whole. A bus line ran within three miles of the village, and supplemented the twice-a-week train with a daily bus service to Maverick and Calgary: isolation was a thing of the past.

The 'social life' of Rolling Slopes was livelier than it ever had been. Dances and ball games and movies in Maverick made up the greater part of it for the younger generation: their elders shared in these, and supported church activities and the U.F.A. organizations with more enthusiasm than did their children. But the trend was away

from the district: amusement at home could no longer compete with entertainment abroad.

The tendency oppressed Griselda: things were turning out so very differently from what she had hoped when, years before, she had set herself to fostering a settlement. She had worked all along for permanence and stability -- what had developed was quite the reverse.

Late in the summer of 1925 a dance was held in the new hall. It began auspiciously enough with a good attendance of local people and a small sprinkling of workmen from the railway, by then well past Rolling Slopes. Ordinarily these men would have driven into Maverick for their evening's entertainment, but the idea of the dance held them. The first carloads to arrive were reasonably sober and friendly. A big, slouching, raw-boned fellow with a violin offered his services to the orchestra and scrambled up on the stage to tune up. His companions distributed themselves about the hall, talked quietly, or joined in the dancing. Walter Kerrigan knew some of them, Ches Meade others. Enough came to make a marked shortage of women and no one suggested to Henry Burton and Engvald Nordstaad that they get up and dance instead of smoking and talking in a corner.

A square dance was called for, and Ches Meade, who had of late superseded Joe Griggs as caller, got up to

preside. Couples formed up. At the back of the room, Albert Horner hastily tried to gather one more set.

"Two more couples! Just two more -- come on, Eileen!"

Eileen Price refused, poutingly, turning to the man beside her to say scornfully,

"Those old things -- now we'll have to wait for a good dance!"

"Come on Mrs. Weitz!" urged Albert. "Oh, well -- you will, won't you, Mrs. Kerrigan? Show these girls how to do a real dance! No, you don't, Walter -- find yer own partner -- I'm dancing with your mother -- 'tain't often I get the chance!..."

Griselda saw Eileen laugh, and knew a surge of anger.

"A good sound spanking...!" she thought, and then the figures of the dance claimed her attention.

"Eleman left!"

Ches's high voice carried well and could be heard at the back of the hall far better than Joe's.

"Meet your partner, pass her by,
Wink at the next one on the sly...
Swing when you meet...."

The dance was just finishing when the second lot of workment burst in with a clatter and loud shouts of,

"Le's dance... C'mon sweetheart.. Le's dance,"

and some ribald singing. Evidently they were very drunk. The committee in charge of the dance held a hasty consultation.

"What'll we do? Throw 'em out?"

"We don't want a fight in here -- wreck the place!"

"Maybe those first ones kin keep 'em quiet."

An appeal to the sober element among the workmen resulted in temporary restoration of peace. The latecomers obligingly retired to the back of the hall and sat down. One or two slid off the benches and went to sleep on the floor, and the dance went on.

Griselda went quietly into the cloakroom at the side of the stage in order to reach the kitchen at the back. She thought she would make the coffee early, or find someone else to do it. Absently she wondered where the workmen had got their liquor this time -- a year ago, it would have been from Mrs. Cottle!

In the cloakroom she found Mabel Wilkie in tears. She had long since forgiven Mabel for almost marrying Walter: she pitied the girl, knowing well that Dave Wilkie was a harsh man, and that Mabel was not happy. Mabel's color had faded in four years: although still a pretty woman, she looked wan and lifeless. Griselda stopped to enquire of her what was wrong, and Mabel controlled herself and explained.

She had come late, and while removing her wraps in the cloakroom, noticed a stir in a pile of coats that had toppled off an overladen hook. Investigating, she

discovered beneath them, a half-suffocated baby. The child's cries brought its mother, a stranger to Mabel, to the scene, and she had now taken the baby out to the car.

Griselda too was shocked at the near-tragedy. She calmed Mabel as best she could, and asked her to look after the making of the coffee. Mabel promised, and outwardly her placid self once more, only said bitterly as they passed back through the cloakroom on their way out,

"If I had a baby, I wouldn't leave him to be suffocated under a pile of coats!"

The moment she stepped out of the cloakroom, she was claimed as a partner. Griselda looking after her was divided between pity and self-reproach. She turned to leave by the side door of the hall, but Maude Horner bustled up.

"Do you suppose that's the new people on Harris's place?" she demanded. "There -- at the back."

Griselda eyed the lumpish youth, the stocky, foreign-looking man, the two women thus indicated. She was in no mood to welcome strangers, but somebody had to do it.

"Jobson's their name, isn't it?"

"Yes.. Oh, maybe not -- that girl's just plastered with paint..."

"They all are!" Griselda looked around disapprovingly. "Look at Eileen Price -- I don't see her just now-- makes me want to scrub her with soap and water!"

"I think that is Jobsons," mused Mrs. Horner. "Albert says he's a foreigner who changed his name from Jabisky..."

"Let's get it over," said Griselda. Ches Meade paused near them, and she asked,

"Do you know, Ches -- is that the new people from Harris's place -- Jobsons?"

Ches in turn surveyed the newcomers and assured her they were the Jobsons, and Griselda and Mrs. Horner moved towards the back of the hall to speak to the women. One of them, a slim little thing in her twenties with short, straight, coal-black hair and slanting black eyes, answered pertly and joined the dancers immediately. But the other, a stout blonde about ten years older than her friend, smiled pleasantly despite two missing teeth in the front, and seemed glad of their greeting. She was untidily dressed, and unlike the other, wore little makeup.

The next dance started, and Griselda and Mrs. Horner made their way back to the front of the hall, still puzzled, a little doubtful.

"That little snip!"

"If my husband ever spoke to me like that on the dance floor or any other time...!"

"Dance, old girl?" said Albert at her shoulder, and as Maude moved away, she began to pour out her tale to

him. Albert listened, and laughed.

"Ches 'ad you two on, didn't 'e? Never set eyes on 'im I expect--anyway it ain't the Jobsons!"

Griselda again had her hand on the knob of the side door when shouts at the main door at the end of the hall arrested her exit. She waited until the latest group of the construction crew got into the hall.

"Once they're all in," she thought, "I'll go -- I don't want to meet them outside and I hate to bother anyone to see me home."

These latecomers were less amenable to reason than their comrades. They scattered through the crowd yelling and singing: one of them spied the fat blonde whom Ches had identified as Mrs. Jobson. He charged into the crowd of dancers and pushed aside her partner.

"Irma! Good ol' Irma! H'yah, Irma? Howsh bish-bishness at Flynn's?"

Griselda realized with a flash of anger that she and Mrs. Horner had been the victims of one of Ches Meade's jokes. For Flynn's, which claimed to be a restaurant, had set up in Maverick at the time of the railway building. To date, the dining room of the PRAIRIE VISTA hotel and the Chinese restaurant had lost no trade through Flynn's, yet Flynn throve exceedingly in spite of such minor setbacks

such as his waitresses being ordered out of town by the police, and regular fines for selling liquor. The fat blonde with the toothless smile, was then, one of Flynn's latest?...

Mrs. Kerrigan looked around for Ches, the perpetrator of this ugly jest. The only thing that saved him from a public calling-down at that moment was the fact that he was talking rapidly and his listener was the little slant-eyed girl, likewise from Flynn's.

The partner of "good ol' Irma" had tired of the detention of his blonde by the drunken newcomer. He pushed him roughly aside and clutched Irma around her bulky waist. His rival uttered a roar of rage, and grappled with him. In an instant they were rolling on the floor and Irma uttered a piercing shriek.

Griselda slipped quietly from the hall. A line of cars stood along the side of it: she passed between two that she recognized as Horner's and Nordstaad's, and thought vaguely, "at least they're good people..."

Her foot struck something that rolled and clinked: she hurried behind the line of cars to gain the road, and could hear inside the hall enough noise to indicate that peace was not to be easily restored. A silly high-pitched laugh came from the last car but one on of the line, and a man's voice said thickly,

"Aw, c'mon, Eileen...!"

"Eileen!" thought Griselda, "Eileen Price? Surely not -- but I didn't see her during that last dance.. Her mother would be so upset -- she doesn't know about this, I'm sure..."

She went home, and once inside the tall white house, felt old and tired and forlorn. Upstairs Jasper slept soundly and awoke only when she crept into bed beside him. She told him everything that had happened, and he murmured,

"Time you'n me was stayin' home from these things. Get someone else to see to the lunches. Times has changed!"

He slept again, but his wife lay awake for a long time.

"We wanted it -- the railway an' the cars an' the money.. We wanted progress. What's progress... Is this progress? Eileen Price... She was such a pretty little girl -- not skinny, like Doris! The first baby born here, and now... That Ches! I'll give him a piece of my mind when I catch him.. Him and that little tart with the slant eyes.. Guess it wouldn't do any good....."

It seemed hours later that she heard Walter come in, and called to him softly. Walter seemed cheerfully excited by the events of the evening that had so depressed his mother.

"And Engvald threw him out!" he concluded a brisk account of the free-for-all that had ended the evening. "And you should see the black eye Ches got from one of those fellows!"

"I'd like to!" said Griselda. She went to sleep, vaguely comforted by the thought that someone had given Ches Meade a fraction of what he deserved.

.....

The episode left a bad taste in her mouth, and spurred her on to try to find a remedy for the state of affairs. She first approached individual women in the community, who might be expected to feel the same way as she did about the problem. Mrs. Horner, Mrs. Nordstaad, and Emma all agreed with her that such an exhibition as the dance had provided was deplorable. Yet, when, encouraged by this support, Griselda suggested that the Women's Club and the Ladies' Aid, working as groups, try to clean up the dances and ban liquor on the premises, she found no support. The women as a whole were apathetic. She urged them in vain.

"A good many of your children are still small. This sort of thing won't look so harmless to you in ten years, when it's your sons and daughters at these dances!"

"Seems to me our dances are no worse'n dances any

other place!" said Mrs. Murphey. Her words released a string of protests against Griselda's appeal.

"They're a lot better'n the Maverick dances!"

"That railway gang'll be out of the way in a week or two an' things 'll settle down."

"Course the kids are a bit silly, but what kids aren't?"

"If you want to see a really bad bunch of kids, look at that Bell Creek bunch!"

"We've got to move with the times."

Griselda, looking around the circle of faces, knew she was defeated. These women, good and decent as they were in the main, either had no conception of the problem as it loomed to her, or were refusing to face it. She went home discouraged, and as she passed through the store to pick up the mail, she thought there was a sort of triumph in the looks directed her way by the group of young people lounging around the store. Eileen Price, airy and mocking, Ches Meade leaning on the counter, a couple of girls from Bell Creek, a sleek-haired, black-eyed lad she had never seen before, with a cigarette clinging to his lip as he talked.. Triumph -- or indifference? At all events they were deliberately not noticing her.

She stepped inside the post-office cage and took down the mail from the box marked KERRIGAN. Walking across to the house, she examined it. THE FAMILY HERALD AND WEEKLY STAR, The NOR'WEST FARMER, a belated Eaton's sale catalogue, a farm machinery circular, the CALGARY HERALD for three days, a couple of letters. A Halifax postmark: that would be Jean of course... The other, addressed in pencil in a round, childish hand, was likely a note or a letter from one of her grandsons. They sent her Valentines made in school and Christmas cards decorated in crayon, and invitations to school exhibitions.. She tore it open. It was poorly written and atrociously spelt.. It was incredible.

> Hello, Ma Kerrigan,
>
> This letter mebbe won't get no welcome from you, being that its functin is to tell you some true facts.
>
> This community is plain sick of you running things just because your old you think things has got to be run the ways you want them. You think young people oughta do nothing but go to church and work. Beleive you me the people won't stand for it much longer.
>
> I know it was you drouve Mrs. Cottle out and I just want to say she's as good as you any day and mebbe she's not the only one that will be drouve out.
>
> You neednt try to figger who sent this for it is writen for lots of us and I'll sign it right.
>
> Here for Rolling Slopes.

Griselda gasped, feeling her breath come short. She read it again, and examined the envelope. A cheap blue-lined one, postmarked Calgary -- that meant nothing in these days of easy travel. The writing might be anyone's, child, or adult, man or woman -- a thick lead-pencil and a big round hand.. disguised perhaps. Who?

The chattering, giggling group in the store... It could be. But then, they had not been adherents of Mrs. Cottle... Yes, Ches Meade had! If it was Ches, sooner or later he would give himself away -- he loved the public eye too well to conceal for ever the fact that he had scored off Mrs. Kerrigan.. It might not have been Ches -- there might be others who resented her..

She read the letter a third time and a fourth. No clues beyond the two obvious ones -- the reference to the young people, that to Mrs. Cottle. Might they not have been put in by someone else -- they were so obvious. A Ches Meade would certainly think of them -- so would any snippy sixteen-year old in the district -- so would someone else, clever enough to ape this illiterate style, and so divert suspicion.

"It could be anyone!" thought Griselda with horror. "Anyone!"

A moment's calm reflection told her that was not quite true. She began to eliminate, counting off the

people who could not have written it. The Horners, the Nordstaads, the Burtons, the Prices... No-only the elder Prices.. ... the Wilkies... But Mabel had no reason to love her... But so many were left who quite possibly might have written such a letter. Or instigated its writing.

Round and round went her mind, round and round, gathering in suspects, tossing them out, gathering in and tossing out. The clock chimed the hour and Griselda, with a start, hastened to get supper. She heard the men on the step, debated within herself. If she showed the poisonous letter to Jasper, there would be steps taken to protect her.. The combination of an infuriated husband and an outraged postmaster was not one to trifle with. There would be a policeman on the scene and the intricate machinery of the law would order a watch kept on all incoming letters.. If the culprit were caught it might be a serious matter for him...or her... It would certainly be an unpleasant matter for Griselda with the publicity.

As Jasper turned the door-knob, his wife dropped the letter into the stove. It flared, blackened, was gone... Griselda served supper with a smile, and asked her husband if he thought the U.F.A. local groupd would do anything about the dances at the hall. Jasper did not think they would. The hall, as he pointed out, was strictly a community undertaking. Practically all the farmers had a share in it:

they would prefer to see it profitable rather than respectable, under the circumstances.

Dave Wilkie, president of the U.F.A. local, put the matter simply and briefly when Griselda made her final appeal to him.

"This hall ain't paid for yet, you know," he said. "Long as we have dances here, the money comes in. What's the sense of throwing it away, Mrs. Kerrigan? That's what we'll be doing if we get too strict about a little drinking. They'll all go to Maverick, or open up that Bell Creek joint again, and then we'll be left with the mortgage!"

His view prevailed. Griselda, having made her stand clear to all, refused to compromise. She abandoned her single-handed struggle and in bitterness of heart went further and resigned her office as President of the women's club. By the end of 1925 she rarely went near the hall except for church services. And then she could not but note, that although the population of the district had more than doubled in ten years, the congregation was smaller than it had been during the war.

Discouragement at this time was leading her more and more to identify herself with the past. She who had advocated change and progress, and considered the terms

synonymous, would now gladly have called a halt to all change. She was no longer drawn to the future. It was all around her, the future she had anticipated, and the settlement and the prosperity. But it was not an orderly, sober prosperity, but a restless changing world of people apparently no happier and no better for the improvement in their material circumstances. Neighbors quarreled: there was bad blood between Nordstaad and Evans, between Dave Wilkie and Ches Meade, Between Ches Meade and Nordstaad. Since the Hampton-Reids had opposed the building of the railway that cut in two their grazing lease, there had been increased coldness between ranch and farms. It was only mitigated briefly at the time of the prairie fire, the most serious in thirty years...

Shortly after the trains began running through Rolling Slopes, the prairie fire occurred. Ignited apparently by a spark from the engine, it crawled slowly at first, a thin line of orange flame, scarcely visible against the tawny grass save for the ever-spreading patch of char in its rear. It was early December, and the light snowfall of the preceding week had disappeared in a Chinook that lasted for thirty-six hours and dried the ground thoroughly. Smoke curled up leisurely, and told its own story, and a hasty warning was telephoned about from the store to the ranch-house and to the farms to the east. Fire-fighters assembled at the store:

Ches Meade and George Evans, Nordstaad and Henry Burton, Joe Griggs and Walter Kerrigan, and the oldest Patchenko boys. Other men promised to come if word were sent back for more helpers. They attacked the thin line of fire at its east end, beating and smothering the flames with sacks dipped in the barrels of water in the backs of the trucks that had brought them to the scene. The line of fire shortened perceptibly, and its eastward advance just north of the village was checked. To these efforts was owing the fact that Patchenko's house, the elevators, the schoolhouse, and the south-eastern corner of the lease north of the railroad were spared from the blaze. The western side of the flattened V-shaped line of the fire was in turn tackled by the ranch-house crew, who, fewer in number, and faced with the problem of moving the cattle that were wintering on the range, were less successful in their efforts. The fire was well into the lease before they got the back-fire set, quite close to the ranch-house and buildings which were protected by a wide ploughed guard. Old Bill, co-operative for once in his life, with Albert Horner and two other men set their own back fire across the big coulee and along the road. The fire-fighting started about noon: by four o'clock the flames were extinguished everywhere save along a narrow strip south-west of the ranch-house. Several of the original crew who turned out to battle the blaze were on their way home when, with a rush

and a roar, the wind came up. It was no chinook this time, but a cold, fifty-mile-an-hour westerly gale, that, in its first gust scattered far and wide bits of burning weeds and fiery sparks from the original blaze.

"Can't go far," said Ches Meade, wiping his sooty face, "the backfire's just over that little hill."

"If it doesn't get away," agreed his partner, one of the elevator men. As they looked, the fire roared away, already over a mile in advance of them, a low but lurid ridge of orange-red flame in the twelight, crested with billows of smoke and followed by a black blanket of burnt grass. Ahead of it, Albert Horner and Old Bill were caught in a great shower of blown ash and fine black charcoal dust: had it not been for the frozen marshy patch in the coulee bottom, the whole willow thicket and Old Bill's shack would have been burned. As it was, the flames were stopped by a plowed field on the north and by the road, and the farms north of the coulee were no longer threatened.

The ranch-house and its buildings were protected by some yards of plowed ground that would have stopped any ordinary blaze. But the strength of the wind carried the sparks to ignite the feed-stacks, and the frantic Harry Wise, having by desperate efforts extinguished the flames around the barns and sheds, turned back to see that the trees and bushes of the little plantation against the house were all ablaze.

Albert Horner and his crew arrived at that moment: they could not save the house, which might not have burnt if it had been surrounded by grass. The grass fire passed quickly, but the flaring evergreens and tall poplars and manitoba maples planted by old Mr. Hampton-Reid thirty years before were but a torch held to the house he had built.

South of the big coulee, the fire crossed the road, licked over a stubble field and threatened Price's farm. It passed the next road allowance, and was halted and by a plowed field. As its front was then over two miles wide, the wedge of plowing was a godsend to the wearied firefighters.They had long since been augmented by men from the Bell Creek district, and by volunteers rushed to the scene from Maverick. The south tongue of the blaze was finally extinguished at the edge of Burton's farmyard after destroying his two haystacks and a granary of wheat. But the northern wedge, widening once more as it spread and pushed by the brisk wind, went on for another five miles.

Few people slept that night at Rolling Slopes. Mrs. Horner sat up all night, dressed for instant flight, with the three children sleeping in their heavy clothes on. Towards midnight her husband, black and grimed, looked in to tell her he thought it was safe now. But to the west she could see the tongues of flame rising from the burning ranch-house: to the east several strawstacks flared luridly

and occasionally she saw the actual ridge of flame on the crest of a rise. The air was heavy with smoke, and the strong cold wind laden with ashes and cinders.

In the village, Griselda made hot coffee and lunch for the men who came in by twos and threes to report progress, phone their information in to Maverick, and gulp a hasty meal. A big herd of the cattle wintering on the home range were hurried by, bawling pitifully, to be turned into the southern tip of the range that had escaped the blaze. Ches Meade and Walter returned, completely exhausted, and grimed from head to foot. They were followed by the elevator man, and shortly after, by Harry Wise, who phoned his message of disaster in to the Maverick telegraph office. That was shortly after midnight when the fire had swept beyond Rolling Slopes. Towards morning the wind went down and dawn revealed a blackened world. Next day it snowed, and a foot of snow covered the ash and cinder and restored to the hilly land its normal winter aspect. Only, for months afterwards, the charred, burnt-off fence-posts dangling here and there on the wires told of the passing of the fire.

The ranch had suffered most heavily. The loss of the house, of the feed, of the winter grazing, was a serious matter.

"It'll never be the same again," mourned Harry Wise.

"Aw, what d'you care?" scoffed Ches Meade. "You

get your wages jest the same. It's his royal highness out there at the coast that'll be footin' the bill!"

But the Kerrigans were sympathetic, and for the first time in the twenty years of their acquaintance, there was a genuine understanding between Griselda and Harry Wise. For the first time she could put herself in the place of the ranchers and think what the devastation must mean to the men who had worked so hard to preserve the Grasmere Ranch. She put it into words while Harry Wise warmed his stiffened hands at the stove.

"I can't help but be glad that Mr. Hampton-Reid didn't live to see it! It won't mean so much grief to the young folks. "

Harry Wise glanced at her suddenly, gave a twisted grin.

"Yeah...that's right!" he said.

The words were the epitaph of his old hostility towards the Kerrigans. Henceforth he took to dropping in to visit them occasionally, evidently having made up his mind to accept them as a bit of the past, a link with the old days of the ranch. Griselda wondered if it had been the emergency that had brought them together as it the whole district, or if Harry Wise too had come to realize like herself, how greatly times had changed... Either thought was depressing for the light it cast upon human nature.

"Our hard times were our best," she reflected. "Our hard times... and our disasters." The great blizzard of 1919 had brought people together, and the influenza, and the hailstorms. Not the prosperity and the good luck.

Jasper was well aware of her depression and of its cause. Half jokingly, he said one day,

"Now that you've at last had the sense to give over all this community stuff to the younger women who ought to have been doin' it long ago, how about you an' me taking this trip of ours back east?"

Suddenly it seemed to her that of all things in the world, this was what she most wanted -- to go back. Back where things were rooted firmly and did not change -- back with Jasper, who did not change. He was always the same, always dependable, other women envied her the husband who 'thinks the sun rises 'round you'. The present did not need her: the future was vague and menacing, and at the mercy of a younger generation like Ches Meade and Eileen Price, young people who flickered like a candle flame, and like a flame, threatened to run wild and do incalcuable damage. But the past was safe, stored in memory, alive in those who remembered it with longing.. Harry Wise, and Griselda herself, and Jasper.

"Lots of times I haven't paid much attention to

Jasper," she resolved, "but things'll be different now. We've earned our holiday -- him and me!"

"Oh, yes!" she cried with unwonted enthusiasm. "We'll go -- we'll go next fall!"

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There was comfort in the thought for the months that followed. To go back, to find oneself in the past again... Griselda began to think about her old home, more than she had done for years. Long-forgotten details of Uncle Jacob Leslie's house came back to her, and she had constantly to remind herself that that house had not existed for ten years: that the heavy old furnishings and the narrow garden were gone, blown to nothingness and dust. Even so something in her refused to accept the fact, and sometimes she dreamed that she was back there -- not as a young girl, certainly, but younger than her fifty-nine

years, young enough to run quickly up the dark stairs, past the be-fogged little window on the landing, never once touching the heavy banister rail.

She deliberately ignored events in Rolling Slopes. Hints came to her that the women's club was disintegrating: that Mabel Wilkie, who had succeeded her as President, could not hold it together. She could see for herself that people were more concerned with getting out of the district for their amusements than remaining in it and trying to amuse themselves. Dances and ball games were the only things that kept the young people in Rolling Slopes in their spare time. Griselda had no objection to a ball game as such, but she could not approve the fact that they took place on Sunday afternoons directly after church, and were invariably better attended than the service in the hall. She could not say very much about the ball games because her own household was solidly in support of them. She stoutly refused to attend, even though Jasper, Walter, and Joe did. The order of their departure was invariable.

Joe went first. He had the advantage of being able to go straight from church to his own little shack and thence to the ball diamond without having to encounter Griselda's disapproving eye. Walter was the next to leave.

"Got enough wood and coal?" he would ask

solicitiously after their return from church. Thanks to the fact that the Kerrigans owned the townsite, including the ball diamond, the game could not commence until church was over.

There was always wood and coal in the kitchen, and Walter knew it. He would busy himself about it for a minute or two and then slip quietly away. Fifteen minutes later, Jasper would begin to fidget.

"Think I'll -- er -- get a bucket of water in fresh.... Could do with a nice cold drink..."

And after he set the pail down in the kitchen, he too would amble off to the ball diamond beside the hall, not far from the store. Griselda usually maintained the pleasant fiction that it was purely by accident her men folk wandered off to the game. Sometimes before they got away she managed to impale one or the other with a sardonic glance over her spectacles, and had the satisfaction of seeing him turn red and wriggle. She had, too, been known to remark to Jasper before he made his escape,

"You'll miss the first innings if you don't get your cold drink!"

When the men returned, Griselda never asked them for the results of the game. But if no information was forthcoming, they noted that the conversation at supper took a

slant that way. They in turn suspected her of watching the game from behind the lace curtains of the parlor, but had no proof, and all their attempts to entrap her into an admission of interest had to date failed.

Actually Griselda did less watching than they gave her credit for. Sunday afternoon she wrote letters, made out the Sunday School reports and read the church papers. Quite often she had one or two callers from among the women who had driven over with their families to the ball game. Mrs. Horner, who had never learned to appreciate baseball, frequently appeared.

"The girls are playing today," she observed one hot Sunday.

"What next?" said Griselda. "I didn't know they had a team."

"It's new," replied her friend. "Eileen Price, of course -- those silly Parr girls from Bell Creek, Doreen Prescott, Gertrude Wietz, are all in it, and they say Ches Meade is coaching them. They're playing Maverick today."

"So that's where all the cars are coming from."

Griselda glanced out of the window. Eileen Price was running, after a strike. Her short skirts fluttered outrageously in the wind, the ball sailed over her into the hands of the girl on base, Eileen ducked and dodged

and slid in to the base, sprawling on the ground, and a faint sound of shouting and cheering penetrated to the parlor. A dispute arose on the ball diamond, and Eileen, brushing off the dust, seemed to be the core of it.

"I don't understand them," said Griselda slowly. "I guess I'm getting old."

But she did not feel old in herself. Her mind was keen, her energies unimpaired. Only the difference perplexed her -- her inability to grasp the feelings and motives of others. Was it then old age -- or was it an inevitable condition attendant upon the passage of time?

"Do you understand them, Maude?" she asked curiously.

"No," said Mrs. Horner promptly. She was not perturbed: the fact did not bother her. Little that others outside her own family could do would seriously ruffle her comfortable equanimity, yet she was not a selfish woman -- quite the reverse. She was kindly and open-hearted and intelligent. And untroubled.

With a sinking feeling, Griselda saw the barrier rise here too, unrealized by Mrs. Horner, all too keenly felt by herself.

"We don't understand each other either...!"

.....

The trip was only a few weeks away when Jasper Kerrigan came in from the store one morning rather earlier than usual.

"Don't feel so good!" he complained.

"I'll bring you a cup of coffee -- go and lie down for a while," said Griselda. It was the habit of those who were working in the store to come across to the house for mid-morning coffee. As she poured out a steaming cup, she heard the sofa springs creak. Casually she thought,

"The trip will do him good -- he needs a rest."

Cup in hand she entered the parlor. Jasper lay on the sofa, seemingly asleep. His old hat had fallen to the floor beside him: it seemed for the moment that he was groping for it. But the hand brushing the hat was open and relaxed, and suddenly she knew.

Walter entered the house half-an-hour later to find her sitting tearless and erect beside the sofa, hands folded in her lap, her dark eyes fixed and strained. The cup of cold coffee stood on the table nearby.

"Dad...!" He paused, came to stand beside her. "He's...gone..."

"Yes." Dully she thought, He's not surprised.-- Jasper told him -- he didn't tell me...

She looked up. "Did he know it was going to happen?"

"Yes," replied Walter. "Since May. The doctor said he might live five years -- or it might be any time. Dad didn't want you to worry."

Griselda looked away from him and remained silent although he waited for the words that he could sense she was about to utter. Still she did not speak and there grew in the room an unbearable tension until Walter went quietly away.

Unlike her mother, Emma was voluble in her sorrow. Her unrestricted grief, her easy flow of tears were as inexplicable to Griselda as the older woman's hard, dry misery was to her daughter.

"You'd think she didn't care!" said Emma half-resentfully to her brother the day before the funeral. "I haven't seen her cry once!"

"Did you <u>ever</u> see her cry?" demanded Walter, and Emma realized with a little shock of surprise that she had never done so. Her father's death was the first real sorrow of Emma's comfortable life, and she would gladly have turned for consolation to the mother who shared that grief and given in turn what consolation she could. But there was to be no question of consolation given or received: Griselda's stubborn stoicism repelled her daughter and Emma's display of emotion was alien to her mother.

The same barrier persisted at the funeral. The service was held in Maverick, but Jasper was buried in the little graveyard at Rolling Slopes as he had specified not very long before in conversation with his son. He reiterated at the same time that Griselda was not to know how serious was his ailment.

"She worries - always did. The shock won't be as hard for her as the worry."

Griselda had been spared three months of worry: it was August when Jasper Kerrigan was buried on the sloping side of the big coulee that ran east from the store. A hot dry wind whipped and fluttered the women's skirts, rustled the brown grass all along the hillside, and seared the fragile petals of the flowers piled near the open grave. The strong gusts wafted away their heavy sweetness that had lain sickly in the dead air of the church, and Griselda was thankful for that, as she stood between Walter and Emma near the grave.

Her emotions were numbed, her mind aimless. She found herself thinking with detachment that it was twenty-two years since Jasper had come here and located his homestead. She thought how odd it was that she should have been so determined in those years that they should not leave -- how terrified she had been that Jasper would once more pull up

his stakes and move somewhere else. And now he would stay at Rolling Slopes for all eternity... Here, and not here...

Her little grandson, Tom Burton, who had been Jasper's great favorite, suddenly burst into loud sobs. Griselda had no impulse to comfort him: she sought instead a reason for his outburst and thought she found it in the strangeness of the scene -- Emma weeping, Henry with a black arm-band standing among the pallbearers, Walter very stiff and strange...

The burial-service was read and Griselda crumbled a handful of earth into the grave, and heard again Jasper's voice saying,

"They said this land woudn't grow crops -- and look at it... In ten years we'll go east and tell them..."

The attendants began filling the grave, and Walter drew his mother away. She moved only as far as the edge of the graveyard, and stood there, while Walter, Emma, and Henry Burton exchanged unhappy looks at this new whim. Neighbors came and spoke, and Griselda replied mechanically to the kindly, well-meant words, wishing they would go. The pall-bearers filed past, Joe and Henry remaining with Walter at her elbow.

"Ve miss him!" muttered Engvald Nordstaad and passed on, leaving her hand numb from the grasp of his own. Harry Wise shook hands: his grip had little strength in it,

his hand was knotted with arthritis. Griselda thought there were tears in his eyes, he who had been antagonistic to their coming, two decades before! Andy Price stood talking, talking aimlessly until his wife hurried him away. How old they look! thought Griselda... They have all grown old! All of us -- old together!

It was finished. The mound, flower-covered, looked out of place on the bare, brown, wind-swept hillside. The mourners had gone, the family stood there alone. But just outside the gate were two of the gypsy-like children of the sectionman, Annie and Paul.

"What do they want?" said Emma fretfully. "Just curious..."

But Walter noted the handful of flowers each child held, and went to speak to them. A moment later they were crossing the graveyard to lay the ragged little bouquets of late wildflowers and bright marigolds among the wreaths and sprays. Then, silently, with awed sideways looks at the grave and at Griselda, they ran away down the slope, towards the elevators and their home, running freely, bare brown legs, flying hair -- free and wild, and young.

Griselda recalled her husband's voice, saying,

"A smart little thing, that little Patchenko. Pretty eyes -- I wouldn't wonder if you didn't look quite a bit like that when you were her age..."

He spoilt Emma, she thought suddenly. He spoilt Emma -- because he felt I had an unhappy childhood. He couldn't make it up to me, so he made it up to Emma...

Tears prickled behind her eyes and she turned and hurried out of the graveyard, towards the car.

.....

During the winter that followed, she scarcely left the house and her customary activity dwindled to a minimum. Emma's exasperation with her mother's seeming lack of grief turned to a lively concern over her brooding. She joined with Walter in urging the trip east. Griselda heard them out in silence and said little. Her attention seemed fixed elsewhere: insistence upon it made her irritable.

That fall there was renewed gossip about Eileen Price, and by December there was no doubt about the girl's condition. She stayed at home most of the time, never got out of the car if she did go for a drive, and sat huddled by herself in the back seat, her soft face as defiantly painted as ever. But her round, light-blue eyes that had shifted so challengingly from face to face now stared emptily ahead. Rumors went around, some of them exaggerated, others with a basis of sordid truth. Andy Price was said to have tackled Ches Meade about marrying Eileen. Ches's reply, as he told several of the men, was, "Aw to hell with it -- I ain't the only one!" Mable Wilkie was supposed to have said

to her husband that she should like to adopt the baby when it was born. And Dave, it was rumored, had replied brutally that even though he had no children of his own, he was damned if he'd raise Meade's bastard.

Early in the new year, Mrs. Price came to see Griselda and sat in the front room with the tears streaming down her lined face.

"I don't know what to do, Griselda -- what can we do?"

Irrelevantly it crossed the other's mind that this woman, hopeless, muddled, foolish as she was, was the only person remaining in Rolling Slopes to call her 'Griselda'. She had never taken kindly to the easy christian-naming of people of a later generation. That Mrs. Price should call her 'Griselda' meant something.

She tried to concentrate on the problem in hand. Two years, a year before, she would long since have had a solution worked out, so far as was humanly possible. Now it seemed she must start thinking about it at that very instant. Her mind, sodden with her own grief, was dull -- she fumbled.

"Can't you...send her way?" she asked finally. "Some relative where she could stay until the baby's born?"

"I thought of that," said Mrs. Price drearily. "But Andy's sister has girls of her own, and she don't want Eileen there. Her other aunt never did like the kid -- says

it serves us right for spoiling her so. Oh, Griselda -- you don't know how lucky you are that both your children turned out so well!"

Her tears started again, but Griselda caught the words,

"...so proud of Eileen being the first baby born here..."

Griselda recalled how they had wanted to call the post-office after her, and then after the baby. The fact made her feel that she too was responsible in part for Eileen's welfare now.

"Griselda," said Mrs. Price, "You know so many people in the women's groups an' the church and all that. Do you -- would you write somewhere and find out some place she could go until...?"

Why should I? thought Griselda irritably. Why should I? Why don't they do something for themselves? Eileen's their child, and her mother's been in the women's club and the church as long as I have...

But looking at the blotched, sagging face of her neighbor, she knew the answer. The Prices could not rise to this emergency any more than they could to any other. The inner will was lacking -- they had taken the path of least resistance so long that they now had no other choice. If someone else made the decision, they followed -- otherwise they drifted.

"I'll write," promised Griselda, and was as good as her word. She had a talk with Eileen before the girl left: her parents brought her along, sullen and reluctant, to say good bye and to thank Griselda. In no very good mood, Griselda surveyed her protegée. Her pity for Eileen was mitigated by the knowledge that the girl had certainly brought her troubles on herself, by Eileen's sulky defiance, and by her own Calvinistic upbringing. Sin must be paid for: Eileen had sinned: ought the consequences to be lightened for her? Griselda had her doubts about it, although she reflected that Price and Mrs. Price were paying as heavily as Eileen, and someone else, be it Ches Meade or another, was getting off scot-free.

"Well, Eileen," she said, "You'll be good at the Home, won't you, and do as they tell you? Just remember that people want to help you, and don't make it any harder for them."

"I didn't ask anybody to help me," muttered the girl. "I only want to be left alone -- I can run my own life!"

"A fine mess you made of it, too!" said Griselda angrily. "Just you remember that, my girl -- a mess of your own life and a peck of trouble for your parents!"

"I've got a right to run my own life..!" said Eileen furiously. "You old people..."

A coarsely-written unsigned page flashed into Griselda's memory: anger shook her.

"We old people have worked hard building up a decent way of life that you young ones seem bent on pulling down. And you've no more right as you call it, to things you don't work for than you have to the shoes on your feet without you pay for them! Now you be off, and don't let me hear any complaints from the Home about you, or I'll come and 'tend to you myself!"

The tears had dried in Eileen's eyes, a natural color deepened the painted spot on her round cheeks. She straightened her shoulders and opened her mouth to speak. But Mrs. Price was at the door, and she advanced timidly into the room.

"I guess we'll go, Griselda. You finished your talk with Eileen?"

Eileen's furious look altered to one of appeal. Had she then a spark of better feeling - a concern for her mother? Griselda did not betray her.

"Yes," she said. "She's all ready to go. Good-bye, Eileen."

"Good-bye, Mrs. Kerrigan,"said the girl. Anger or relief deepened her treble tones and gave the words a firmness unexpected in Eileen. She went out with her head up and the color still high on her face. Mrs. Price looked after her.

"She looks better for a talk with you, Griselda--

you are a good friend to us!"

The tribute brought little satisfaction to Griseldda. Mixed with her concern for the Prices was irritation that at a time when she herself was suffering, others should impose an added burden.

Walter and Emma continued to talk about her trip east, and that too she construed as a grievance, remarking when she consented to go,

"Seeing as you're all so dead set on getting rid of me, I guess I'll go!"

Feeling that here was a return of her old, half-humorous pungency, her children were relieved. But Griselda was entirely serious. She wanted to get away from Rolling Slopes, yet lacked courage to make the break. Her brisk self-confidence had gone, and when in March she packed the new luggage and left, it was with a sense of depressing finality.

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THE DEAD PAST

A month later she wondered if she had been wise to come. The long train trip had done nothing to raise her spirits. Instead, for the first day of it she was oppressed with the sense of being adrift once more on the vast plains. The feeling was spiritual rather than physical, for the prairie was very different from her early recollections of it. Fenced and farmed and criss-crossed with roads, linked with railways running east and west, north and south, the land was patently under man's control. The little towns, the sprawling prairie cities had all an air of prosperity.

How big it is, she thought, how much of it lies between me and Rolling Slopes already!..And at Winnipeg she remembered her long stay of forty years before, waiting for the ice to go out of the northern lakes and rivers before

she continued her journey north. She had resolved then to return to Halifax, and show them Uncle Jacob, and Mary Belle, and Luke, and the others, that she was now important and influential and well-to-do, and need never depend on them again. And this was her return.

There was no doubt that she was very welcome in Halifax. Jean, her little sister, who had been Uncle Jacob's favorite was now over fifty. To look at her was to see Emma Burton in twenty years, just as stout, placid, and jolly. Jean was glad to see her sister and made her pleasure evident. Griselda, undemonstrative as ever, was a little embarrassed by her sister's emotion. It saddened her to find how little in common she had now with Jean, save the memories they both shared of their youth. Even these, seen in sharply-differing perspectives by the two women, were not alike. There was, for instance, the recollection of Uncle Jacob.

When Jean spoke of him with sincere affection, Griselda wondered. "Like a father to us," Jean said. Had Uncle Jacob, then, been to Jean as Jasper was to Emma? It might have been so, but Griselda herself had not seen it. Tentatively she cast out a feeler.

"Of course, Uncle Jacob had no use for me!"

Jean's reply was surprising. She said,

"He always thought <u>you</u> had no use for him! He felt bad about it, but he never could get to know you."

Griselda agreed that it had been so, and added her reason.

"I always thought it put him out, having us here when he was such a busy man."

Jean shook her head. "Oh, no! He always felt he could have dome more to help Mother out, and doing what he could for us was his way of making that up."

"Mother didn't feel like that," said Griselda. "She wanted us to be sure and repay him for all he did for us. I guess I didn't do much towards repaying!"

"Don't feel like that," replied the other. "He told me once that -- that we had meant a lot to him."

"You mean, that you had!" said Griselda and her sister did not deny the change in wording

Her feelings were oddly mixed. Her return to Halifax had brought Uncle Jacob and her mother to her mind again: she recalled vividly the promise made and not kept. If Uncle Jacob had felt himself amply repaid by Jean's affection and devotion to him, so much the better. An old account was squared. Yet there was irony in the thought that she, Griselda, had worried and agonized and tormented herself over that promise when she was still a child, and all to no avail. It had been left to Jean, unconscious that there was a debt at all, to pay it. Duty had not animated Jean, but sincere affection.

Its sincerity was proved, to Griselda's mind,

by the fact that Jean had married a man who very like Uncle Jacob. He had the same seriousness, the same love of order, and lack of imagination. Like Uncle Jacob, too, he was puzzled by Griselda. It was evident that he was impressed by her, equally evident that the impression was not entirely favorable. Griselda thought how Jasper would have enjoyed telling tales-- artfully exaggerated-- of the north, of the Indians, of the prairies, in this orderly house. The impulse arose in her occasionally to do so herself, but she suppressed it. Jasper could have done it without giving offence: his humor was kindly. Her own had something of irony, a caustic word came too easily, and she knew it was best not to give it full rein.

Thinking of such a wasted opportunity one day, she realized suddenly that she was thinking of Jasper without the usual dull, sickening, leaden weight of grief. Deliberately summoned up, it came, but not for long. She reproached herself for forgetting, and Walter's words came to her mind.

"He didn't want you worry..."

At the time of Jasper's death they had seemed an added misery, but now, after six months, they were a comfort. They were Jasper's permission to her to go on living. And with a sense of wonder she thought,

"How is it that I am here -- I am the same, and everything else is changed and gone?"

It was so: she felt it keenly with every step that

she took about the city, every word she spoke to old friends and relatives. People, things, places, seemed to have turned fluid and run away, water under a bridge, or changed to dust and blown away before the wind. With them went the memories she had cherished, the life of her youth, that for forty years she had preserved, unchanged, like a miniature under glass.

Mistlike, it melted and disappeared when she walked through the half-rebuilt, devastated area that had been their home, on the slope of the hill above the Narrows. A tall new church with a bell-tower had arisen as a memorial near the site of the old one they had attended as children. There were new houses on the street, and long grass growing among the rubble in the bottoms of ruined basements and between the cracks of the pavement, all heaved and riven by the blast. She had difficulty finding the site of Uncle Jacob's house: the street seemed shorter than of old. And when at last she stood before it, she felt only regret that she had ever sought it out. Until that moment the house had still existed for her. By coming to see the spot, she had destroyed it anew: she almost expected to see the fresh dust rising from the grass-covered ruins, from the gaping basement-hole.

Jean greeted her on her return, placid and smiling.

"You'd never know the old street, would you?" she asked. She was long since reconciled to the changes, she had

lived with them for forty years...

"Did you look for Webster's house?" she continued, the smile suddenly overshadowed by memory of the greater tragedy.

"No," said Griselda, "and I'm not going to."

At least, she thought, I'll keep Mary Belle alive in my mind -- I can't bear not to!

For now that she was back here as she had planned, forty years before, she missed Mary Belle more than she would have admitted. Their friendship -- if it could be described thus -- had lasted several years, supported more on the bickering they both enjoyed, the differences between them, than on any genuine liking for each other. Mary Belle patronized Griselda because she was prettier than the older girl, because she had every advantage instead of being dependent on an uncle. And Griselda in turn patronized Mary Belle because she was older, she was more capable, and because some people -- not many -- liked her better... Luke, for instance, had seemed to, until the quarrel...

She would have enjoyed seeing Mary Belle once more. Always amusing, Mary Belle would not, surely, have changed so much -- they would have sparred in the old fashion. And how well, now, she could have countered the little thrusts, how capably returned them!

But Mary Belle had been dead for ten years...

Lily, who had been a friend of both of them, was there, however. Griselda found her a comfort, for her talk of past and present was very matter-of-fact. She alone did not strain to explain every reference to persons and events unknown to Griselda. She talked naturally of Mary Belle, and Griselda came to realize what sort of person Luke's wife had been. Not so very different from seventeen-year-old Mary Belle Webster, according to Lily, but her listener knew better.

Inevitably too, she met Luke Herron. Her first thought was, How he has aged! He looks years older than Jasper! Yet Jasper had been sixty-seven when he died: Luke was now sixty-two. He looked tired, was obviously very lonely and very glad to see Griselda. They spoke of the past with constraint, and not until she mentioned Mary Belle did the conversation flow easily.

She saw him several times in the weeks that followed. He told her about his daughter, married in Boston, about the son who had been killed in the war a few months before Mary Belle's death.

"She was splendid..." His voice trailed off, and Griselda tried to imagine Mary Belle being heroic. In thirty years, she might have learned heroism: so far as Luke was concerned, she had.

It was Lily's suggestion that Griselda remain in Halifax. Lily had a house: Griselda could live with her.

They had always agreed well, and although Griselda discouraged the idea, she did consider it. Her sister was enthusiastic over the plan, and Luke equally so. He talked about it, time after time, and one day, as she watched him plod down the walk, shoulders a little bent, she had in rapid succession two appalling thoughts.

"If it had been Mary Belle instead of Luke, I wouldn't have been bored stiff all afternoon!"

And then, "If I stay here -- maybe every day will be like this!"

It did not bear thinking of...Days that followed a routine of which Luke would be a part. He might ask her to marry him -- most likely not. But he would depend on her to listen to him and console him, to prop up his failing self-confidence and mitigate his increasing loneliness.

The prospect was awful... In a sudden revulsion of feeling, she saw Luke for what he was: a weak man. Forty years ago, he had been weak, taking the line of least resistance and leaving her to face alone a tempest in a teapot, created by a jealous girl. It had worked out for the best all around. Because Mary Belle was weaker than Luke -- or pretended to be -- she had forced him into an assumption of strength. And he adored her. But no one could take Mary Belle's place, least of all Griselda.

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Griselda went home. She arrived at Rolling Slopes in June, when the fields were green, the hillsides grassy. From the coach window she caught a glimpse of the graveyard across the deep coulee, and beyond it, the red barn on her son-in-law's farm.

They were all at the siding to meet her, Walter and Joe, Henry and Emma and the little boys. In a solemn row on the cinders stood the young Patchenkos, wide-eyed and barefooted. Their unkempt mongrel dog licked sore paws as he lay, stretched out behind the row of scratched brown legs.

Behind the section-man's house, out in the lease, half a dozen white-faced cows grazed, calves beside them. And as Henry Burton's car crossed the tracks, they nearly ran over Old Bill.

The hermit, deafer than ever, invariably plodded down the middle of the road as he approached the village. Angry drivers declared that he did it on purpose: prolonged blasts of the horn failed to move him, and on this occasion, Henry pulled over to the extreme edge of the road to pass. Old Bill raised his head and looked sideways at the car, spat, and looked once more to earth as they drove by. Sack on back, rifle under arm, he was the same as he had been ten years before, little changed from twenty years back. Griselda felt almost affectionate towards him. He was dirty, disreputable, and hostile, but he was a constant among the many variables

of life. He might have resisted civilization, but he was equally, blessedly, impervious to disintegration. He was an element...

THE LIVING PRESENT

Rolling Slopes was outwardly much the same as when she had left it. Visitors came and within a week Griselda was aware of all that had happened since she left. Mrs. Price told her that Eileen's baby had been born several weeks before, and adopted out. Eileen herself had a job in the city.

There was constraint in Mrs. Price's manner when she spoke of their obligation to Griselda, and the latter did her best to make the other feel more at ease. The old casual friendship with its interchange of talk about small, everyday matters was clouded by a tragic knowledge: between them, a painful intimacy lay raw under the placid surface of the relationship. She was relieved when Mrs. Price left, and she knew that relief to be shared by her friend. It was all a part of the inevitable change, pervading every aspect of life

in spite of all the individual could do to resist it. There was no cure for it: no palliative but indifference. Griselda tried hard to cultivate indifference, to look upon the lives of others with detachment instead of with the lively partisan interest that was natural to her, that had made her for so long a staunch friend, a foe to be reckoned with. But indifference and detachment came hard.

There was the matter of avoiding community entanglements. Doris Evans appeared one day with a complaint about Mabel Wilkie's management of the club.

"'Twasn't like when you were President!" she lamented. "We don't seem to get near as much done, either. There's lots of people would be glad to see you in again, if you'd consider taking office...?

She looked at Griselda questioningly. The other recalled how Doris, once her right hand in the club, had changed sides, drifted into the opposition. Now she was changing sides again -- she, and how many others? I don't want to know, she thought, and aloud she said,

"I'm not interested, Doris. It's not the President that makes the club -- it's the people in it. I think if you've got complaints, you'd better make them in open meeting."

Doris bridled and flushed. "Oh -- I-I-you know how hard it is to stand up and say to her face that you don't like the way she's doing things..."

"I know," said Griselda. "It's a lot easier to talk behind her back!"

She reflected after Doris had gone that probably the other woman would never forgive her and that she did not care. But when they next met, Doris was much the same, apparently had not taken offence. Griselda puzzled about it, for Doris was notoriously touchy, and came finally to the unflattering conclusion that her opinion no longer mattered. She had ceased to be a power in the district: she was an old lady whose ideas counted for little. The thought stung at first, yet she had to admit that her own attitude had fostered the impression.

By the fall she had something else to think about. Her absence from home enabled her to look at Walter with something of an unprejudiced eye upon her return. She decided that Emma was perhaps right in claiming that her brother was getting to be a regular, pokey old bachelor and needed livening up. Walter was far too sedate for a man in his early thirties: he certainly had no interests outside the store and the farm and the family.

Griselda's conscience still worried her over the outcome of Walter's affair with Mabel, and she had come of late to wish that he, too, were married. He would be lonely when she died, and the fact that she had lived the greater part of her life passed often through her mind, not with

threatening or foreboding, but as a simple fact. Yet Walter took kindly to his bachelor condition, showed no inclination to change it. His mother, surveying the local eligible girls, told herself that she was not surprised. They were not good enough for him.

But even when Betty Allen came to board with the ~~three~~ Kerrigans, who had not boarded the teacher for the past three years, Walter remained unquickened. She arrived in 1928 to teach at Rolling Slopes, a friendly, enthusiastic girl with curly sandy hair in a boyish bob, and round, honest grey eyes. While appreciating her interest, Rolling Slopes found her interesting. She was an immediate success at Rolling Slopes, so much so that in spite of the fact that she was boarding with Burtons until Christmas, Griselda saw little of her for some weeks.

Then one Saturday afternoon when harvest was nearly over, Emma and Betty drove out to a field where the Burton's threshing outfit was at work. At the store, Griselda joined them, squeezing into the back of the car with her lively grandsons, the basket of sandwiches, and a couple of corked granite jugs of coffee.

"Where's the cookcar?" she demanded at sight of the lunch.

"It's moved," explained Emma. That field's nearly finished and I told Mary I'd take lunch this afternoon."

The cook-car and bunk car had indeed vacated their corner of the field and were nearly out of sight when the car drove up to the outfit. The little boys scrambled out and ran away up the field towards the machine: Emma and Griselda began to take out the lunch, and Betty stood with the two-year old Sammy clinging to her hand, and watched the harvesters.

The hum of the machine ceased and the racks stood still while the men came for their lunch. The fine dust hung in the air for yards around the outfit, clung fuzzily to the face and hair, outlining every line and wrinkle and muscle on the faces of the workers. For twenty minutes they relaxed, talking and laughing gustily, teeth and eyeballs flashing white in the grimed faces.

Then the machine spluttered again, the throb of it filled the air and the empty racks swayed and creaked as they lumbered off. The laden ones commenced moving towards the thresher: the first began unloading, and the chaff flew out in a golden spray. The three women sat watching for a few minutes, Griselda and her daughter with the pleasure of seeing a familiar scene re-enacted, Betty with a curious sense of exhilaration. The quick throb of the engine, the vibration of the air, the rhythmic tossing of the sheaves that were swallowed up and disgorged as a

trickle of grain from one spout, a flying golden arc of chaff from the blower, all took meaning, fell into a pattern.

"It's right," thought Griselda, and the word itself seemed enriched in meaning here in a wide, open world, warm in the September sunlight, smelling of rip, dry straw and horses.

"Do you like it?" Emma asked Betty Allen.

"I love it!" said Betty. "It's so--so exciting!"

She looked for a moment apologetic, as if she had sounded silly. But Emma smiled, so her dark eyes crinkled up in her fat face.

"Isn't it?" she agreed unexpectedly. "People sometimes say life in the country's dead, but I don't think so. There's always something doing. An' like you say, the harvest's exciting -- I could just sit here and watch it for hours if I hadn't anything else to do."

Griselda said nothing, looking from one to the other as they spoke. But the little incident was the beginning of her liking for Betty, and it was her own suggestion that the girl should board with them for the rest of the school year.

Until the end of the fall term, Griselda watched and listened patiently for any information she could glean about Betty Allen. The girl was a capable teacher, and she

had come to a good school. Not for some years had Rolling Slopes been a pioneer school district, doomed by its isolation to the Mr. Hacketts and Mamie Treights of the teaching profession. It was now a prosperous farming community with a pride in its own achievements, and the change in circumstances was reflected in the well-being of the school. The classroom was tidy and well-kept, the children obedient and reasonably proficient in their work. People with little or no education were determined to see that their children did better. Where the older brothers and sisters of her pupils had perhaps only a Grade Five or Six schooling, Betty's students took for granted that they would go on to Grade Eight at least, and perhaps to High School in Maverick. Rolling Slopes prided itself on its harmonious relations with its teachers, who received a good salary, usually stayed two or three years, and maintained friendly communication with the district when they left.

Betty made no secret of her enthusiasm for her school and students. It was one of the reasons for her popularity. She liked the location of the school, lonely on its grassy hill-top. In the fall the short, grazed-over lease was brown, save where a trace of summer's moisture lingered in the coulee-bottoms. Wild sunflowers bloomed late along the roadsides. Even a few, stalky, parched-

looking crocuses, their tattered blooms greyish in color instead of the tender bluish purple of the spring flowers, rustled uncertainly in the wind. Withered stems of the little plant the children called 'ragged robin' stood forlornly about bearing untidy seed tufts, and the stiff buckbrush leaves rattled in the breeze.

She did not mind walking home from school if Henry Burton was too busy to bring her: she was not scared of the range cattle.

"How do you like your new teacher?" demanded Walter Kerrigan of his nephew, little Douglas Burton, one day.

"Fine," said round-faced Douglas. "I want a scribbler with a horse on it," he added as an afterthought, and ran to pick it out.

"He's going to marry her when he grows up," said his mother. "He told us so last night."

"Well, now, that's fine!" agreed Walter. "Think she'll wait for you, Doug?"

"Seems to me there's a better way of keepin' her in the family," suggested Henry Burton with a twinkle. "She's a right nice girl, Walter."

"Oh, I'm too old for the likes of her," said Walter.

"You're only two years older'n Ches Meade, an'

he certainly hangs around enough, considering how long the girl's been here!" said Emma with exasperation. "You act as if you were fifty, Walter!"

Unruffled, Walter continued to count out eggs from a small case into a larger one, eyeing each one sharply for cracks. He showed no inclination at any time to compete with Ches for the favors of Betty Allen. In fact, as Emma had remarked, he seemed much older than his years and looked at thirty much as he did ten years later, nondescript, a little stooped. His old affair with Mabel Prescott had been nearly forgotton by his neighbors, who had come to regard him as a born bachelor.

Having thus easily got Betty Allen into the house, Griselda found it was a different matter to make Walter conscious of her. Or, for that matter, to make Betty regard Walter as a contemporary of her own rather than of Griselda. The girl persisted in considering him middle-aged: to the end of her stay there, he was wont to refer to her as "that kid."

Griselda did her best.

"You'd better wait an' see Betty home from the dance tonight," she would observe. "That tough crowd from Maverick 'll be there, I guess."

"Well, if Betty'll come home at a decent time..." Walter would begin. And Betty's indignant reply would cut

him short,

"Just because you must have your sleep, Walter, you don't need to think I'm coming home before the end. I'll see myself home if I have to!"

She rarely had to. Griselda became used to Walter's return just after midnight, while Betty danced till three and four in the morning.

But even though Betty and Walter obdurately refused to see each other as future helpmates, Griselda found Betty's presence in the house very pleasant. Through the girl's eyes she came to see the children of the community, the younger ones whom she still thought of as babies, as individuals. She realized with a little shock that she was still thinking of Ches Meade and Eileen Price, of Walter and Emma and Mabel and Henry, as the young people of Rolling Slopes, when, actually they were long since adults. A whole new generation was growing up whom she scarcely knew, and she listened with interest to Betty's accounts of them. The Grade Eight class -- with Annie Patchenko always at the head. The Grade Six, with Eric Nordstaad and Jim Horner. The four beginners, all so different. From Betty's description, Griselda could fit three of these four into the families they came from.

Solveig Norstaad, with long braids so fair they were almost white, flinging herself into the work with intense concentration, doing it carefully, according to the exact

direction. When complete, it was perfectly tidy, unmarked by smudges or rubbed-out lines, immaculate as her own small person in starched print frock and blue hair-ribbons...

How like Engvald and Minna, thought Griselda. No other family here has that exact combination of traits, that passion for work...

And there was Olga Patchenko, with untidy brown hair and shy, frightened brown eyes. Olga who did her assignment hastily and then drew cats and rabbits and horses all around the edges, for she was an artist, like her older sister, Annie. And such art, said Betty proudly. She would enter it in the School Fair -- there would be nothing like it from other schools around, she was convinced.

That was the Patchenkos, thought Griselda. Untidy-- with that sprawling house and the chickens scratching up to the door, but always the bright poppies and marigolds in a little fenced-off plot. The careless, happy-go-lucky big boys, Pete and Mike and Stephan -- no ambition beyond a job on the railway or on a farm, but delighted to play a fiddle or an accordian in the dance orchestra...

Douglas Burton worked hard, reported Betty. He did his best and if it was not as good as someone else's best, he did not worry about it.

Just like Emma...

But Ethel Horner did not quite fit in, she thought.

Jim and Ted, yes -- they were very obviously Albert and Maude. Good and honest, reliable and decent. Not the cleverest, but always among the best-liked. Where did Ethel fit in? Ethel, who sat quietly at her desk, thinking things over before she started. She started late and worked slowly, and took the day's work home every night to show her parents. Was there something sober and calculating in Ethel that did not form a part of any other member of the family?

Children were interesting for that very reason, thought Griselda. Emma -- she had never understood Emma -- had always thought her daughter had taken after Jasper's side of the family. And all the time, Emma was the very type and pattern of her own sister Jean...

I'd like a granddaughter, thought Griselda. Now if Walter had only got married... If Walter and Betty...!

Her mind was back to Betty Allen. More and more she longed for Walter to see where his own best interests lay. Betty was the very wife for him -- good natured, gay, popular, with a streak of good hard common sense underlying it all. And if Walter didn't look out, some else would snap her up!

Betty Allen was enjoying herself thoroughly in her first year of teaching. She was enthusiastic about her school and about the community, and because she was jolly, sensible, and not too pretty, she was liked by both young

and old. There were young people in the district and no lack of company, and dances and shows and parties. There was church and Sunday School when weather permitted, and picnics in the fine weather and skating on the river -- for the prevalance of cars made little of a fifteen-mile trip to the river after the ice was thick enough to skate on. It seemed all that Betty had ever hoped for in the life of a country school-teacher.

But then, she was in the habit of enjoying life. She was one of a family of six, brought up in a home of moderately comfortable circumstances and good principles. She had never known great grief of sickness or poverty, any more than she had idleness or luxury or discord. In her experience, family life was happy and people were kind and decent and appreciative.

She was at first happily unaware of the many cross-currents that ran through the district, of deep and smouldering dislike between neighbor and neighbor, of old animosities that were never forgotton. It was a shock to her to discover that Nordstaad, whom she knew as a reliable School Board chairman and the strict, kindly father of three of her best pupils, never lost an opportunity to score off George Evans. The latter in turn was equally vindictive. He impounded Nordstaad's cows when they wandered into his gate one day, and the whole affair came to Betty's ears through a violent playground squabble between the young Nordstaads and the young Evans'. Further

light was cast on it by Ches Meade, who, during Betty's term at Rolling Slopes, spared no effort to keep himself under her eye.

"Hear you've been havin' trouble keepin' the peace," said Ches with a grin, a day or two afterwards.

Betty admitted there had been a squabble.

"Well, I'm glad to see old Engvald get it, for once," continued Ches. "He's played that trick on George often enough, an' on me, too."

"I think it's too bad you can't all settle these things quietly," said Betty, and was annoyed by Ches's laughter. Mrs. Burton cast a new light on the matter subsequently.

"That Evans will not keep up his fences," she said. "An' Ches is just as bad -- he's got no excuse -- he can set up a fence as good as anyone I know. Evans is a useless creature if there ever was one -- Doris didn't do a thing for herself when she married him!"

"She got a husband!" said Henry Burton.

Before Betty left the Burtons at Christmas, she had come to realize something of the tug and sway of conflicting forces in the district. The knowledge was rather disillusioning to her: she was young and enthusiastic and wanted to believe the best. Yet she had to admit that there were lines of division. One lay between the more successful farmers and the near-failures. The Norstaads, Wilkies, Bur-

tons, stood on one side of that line, the Horners inclined towards them rather than to the others -- the Prices, Evanses, Jobsons, and Ches Meade. Another line divided the English speaking from the foreign-born. The Patchenkos stood alone on their side of it, because the two women of the household were so reserved. Even fat Mrs. Wietz was a member of the women's club, in spite of scanty English, and the Nordstaads had long since made their choice, and elected to speak English in the home that their children might suffer no language handicap.

Certain families were isolated to a greater or lesser degree for other reasons. The Kerrigans had a special position because of the store and the Post-Office. The Wilkies were respected -- Dave for his success as a farmer, Mabel because she was an efficient housewife, a community leader. Yet at the same time, Dave was disliked for his domineering manner, his grasping nature, and Mabel was an object of pity because she had a harsh husband and no children.

Betty found that her increased knowledge of the people of Rolling Slopes was a disadvantage. It was difficult to avoid liking some better than others at any time: it was so easy to offend, or to imagine that she had offended. Her very popularity in the district made her a bone of contention.

That year the women's club sponsored a play in which Betty and Ches Meade performed leading roles. Play

practices lasted from November to January, and until Betty went to live at the Kerrigans, she was dependent upon some other member of the cast for a ride to the hall. Ches Meade had been in the habit of picking her up. En route to the hall, he collected other members of the cast, and Betty did not feel that his offer to take her constituted a personal obligation. Ches thought otherwise. He developed a proprietory attitude that exasperated Betty, amused the community, and irritated Griselda beyond measure. Several people actually asked her if she thought Ches was going to settle down at last, and did Miss Allen really like him? Griselda was thunderstruck.

"Like him!" she gasped. "I don't believe any decent girl would look at him! Betty's got more sense than to bother with the likes of him!"

She could hardly wait to get Betty into her own house and away from the contaminating presence of Ches Meade. Shortly after the play came to an end, Ches made his biggest blunder: he tried to assert over Betty an authority based on the assumption that they had 'been going together" all fall and spring. Betty immediately put him right, and when teased about him by others, laughed the matter off. The fact that she had laughed got back to Ches with some exasperation. He had too often made a joke of his neighbors for them to let pass any opportunity of turning a jest against him. His con-

ceit was hurt, and he awaited opportunity to turn the laugh against Betty, showing outwardly little sign of resentment.

A box social was held in May, the first in years at Rolling Slopes, for socials had come to be considered old-fashioned. Betty, to whom these affairs were unfamiliar, was delighted at the prospect and talked Mrs. Kerrigan into attending for an hour or two. Griselda agreed, and prepared two well-filled boxes, secretly resolving that Walter should buy Betty's. Ches Meade in the meanwhile had been tormenting Betty for a clue to identify her box. She refused to tell, and he was no wiser when the social began.

Maliciously, Ches bid up the boxes that the younger boys were trying to get, and suddenly found himself with a giggling thirteen-year old partner for lunch. He brightened up when Joe Griggs shuffled beaming across the floor to claim Betty Allen. She was a great favorite with the old man, for she listened patiently to his tales and often appealed to him to make minor repairs at the school. She sat listening with a smile at lunchtime, while Joe rambled on, forgetting for the moment to eat,

"An' he jest fell off the seat in that cab an' they couldn't bring him 'round. An' no one could stop that train -- seems funny, don't it, but none of 'em knew <u>for sure</u> jes' what to do! So they come back to the smoker to ask me -- I knew the conductor, you see -- an' he says,

'Now, Joe,' he says...."

At the other end of the long table, Griselda was doling out the contents of her basket, preparatory to sitting down to lunch with her son. She was extremely annoyed with him and with the fate that had given Betty as a partner to Joe, when she herself could just as well have had Joe, and Walter, Betty.

"How did you'n Joe know to bid on these two baskets?" she demanded suspiciously, for the baskets were decorated almost alike.

"Well, to tell the truth, we looked," admitted Walter. "We wanted to be sure of gettin' them."

The compliment to her cooking was undeniable: Griselda was a little mollified.

"It's a pity you didn't get Betty's," she observed. "Joe'll talk her ear off!"

"I did," replied her son calmly. "Joe changed with me. She'd talk my ear off!"

It was more than Griselda could bear. "A good many men would be glad to eat dinner with a nice, jolly girl like Betty," she remarked sourly.

"She chatters all the time," said Walter calmly. He cast a glance of friendly amusement down the table and added, "Do her good to listen for a change instead of talk'."

"Well, I hope you aren't going to leave it up to

Joe to take her to the bus!" said Griselda. The night bus passed within three miles of Rolling Slopes after midnight, and Betty was to leave on it that night for the weekend.

"No. I'll take her," said Walter, and with that his mother had to be content.

At the other end of the table, Joe's tale had lasted on and on.

"You folks nearly finished?" boomed Engvald Norstaad.

Betty looked around. Most of those present had finished their lunches: the women were clearing up the remains of boxes and collecting their forks and spoons. She and Joe alone remained at their end of the long table.

"Nearly finished, Mr. Nordstaad," she said pleasantly and Joe, embarrassed, finished his pie with hasty gulps. Then, as Betty began to collect the things and crumple up the papers, he went on,

"That was an awful good lunch, Miss Allen. I sure enjoyed it."

"Mrs. Kerrigan made most of it," said Betty.

"She's a good cook, and a mighty fine woman!" He glanced across at Mrs. Kerrigan who had eaten lunch with her son and would now walk quietly back to the lonely frame house behind the store. "She misses her husband though -- she's failed some since he died. But Walter's good to her -- he's

a good boy, Walter is. You wouldn't find a better boy than Walter, Miss Allen!"

Betty felt that the conversation was about to become personal. She hastily changed the subject.

"You didn't finish your story, Joe. About the train...."

Joe beamed, took up the thread of his tale exactly where he had left it.

"An' I looked at that engine -- 'tweren't the same kind as I druv in Arkansas, but I figgered I knew something about it. So I eased off the throttle, an' by golly, she glided into the next station as nice...."

"Joe been telling you the latest instalment of his magazine?" interrupted Ches, leaning across the table with a grin. On the stage at the front the fiddles were tuning up for the dance: the accordian player tried out a few bars of music.

"The simplest Thing.....
Just doodle-de-doo-
Doodle-de-doo"

Joe looked suddenly old and shrunken and his brown eyes were stricken. Ches laughed,

"That's it -- ADVENTURE ARGOSY or something like that -- I seen it too, that train story! Dance, Betty?"

"No thank you! I'm dancing this one with Joe -- he's my partner and Lila May's yours!"

Ches, an excellent dancer, gazed at her in astonishment, knowing that Joe's idea of waltz, two-step, square dance all and was a jerky trot. But Betty was quite serious: she put her hand on Joe's arm and moved away with him, and Ches stood blankly staring after her. Griselda, observing the little by-play, guessed what had occurred and was highly entertained.

Not long afterwards Walter drove Betty down to catch the bus. But Ches Meade had made certain readjustments about the car: two miles from Rolling Slopes there was a breakdown, and Walter could not repair it. They walked the other mile, to find that the bus had gone, and walked back to Rolling Slopes, arriving about the time that the dance broke up.

No one would have thought anything of the incident if Ches Meade had not felt it necessary to call attention to the success of his joke the next week.

"Been to any more dances since Friday, Walter?" he inquired affably, leaning through the post-office wicket while Walter was sorting the mail. Walter, glancing through the bundle of letters he was pigeon-holing, ignored the quip.

"You'll be as good with the females as you are with them mails!" persisted Ches. "Damn' if I could ever get ol' lizzie to break down when I wanted her to!"

Behind Ches's back the store was filling up rapidly: the school-children were arriving by twos and threes and the harassed Walter could see Joe Griggs serving customers at the counter and getting dreadfully muddled as he always did when hurried. He made no reply to the banter, and Ches came out of the little window like a cork from a bottle. Old Bill Lilly promptly replaced him at the wicket, and Walter, with a sigh, abandoned the sorting to cash the hermit's monthly money order and so get rid of him.

Henry Burton and Betty Allen came in, and Ches edged over towards them.

"Hear you had quite a time the other night," he said, slightly louder than was necessary.

"Oh, No," said Betty lightly. "the car broke down a little way from the bus, so I didn't go after all."

"'Tain't the yarn I heard," grinned Ches. "I was just tellin' Walter that my ole bus always behaved respectable. Who would've believed it of ole Walt! I didn't think he had it in him!"

"Had what in him?" Betty's tone was deliberately even.

"Come, come, now!" None of the rest of us ever spent the night in a parked car with you!"

The impact of a small hard hand against a bony

cheek was audible: Ches's high-pitched remark had assured the attention of all. There was a moment's breathless silence while his face whitened slowly and the few freckles and a day's growth of fair stubble and the red mark left by Betty's hand showed up clearly....

"H-h-hee-ah-hee-hee...!"

The small, rusty chuckle came jerkily as long disused: its owner wagged a hairy head and showed for a moment his tobacco-stained teeth before he collected himself and turned back with a grunt to his business. History was made for the second time in five minutes. Never before or after was Old Bill Lilly heard to laugh.

.....

ON THE SIDELINES

In vain did Griselda try to talk Betty into remaining at Rolling Slopes the next year. The girl would not be persuaded.

"Everybody's satisfied with the school," urged Griselda. "Next year it'll be easier for you and you'll know everybody..."

"I know them too well already," said Betty with unexpected cynicism. "By next year, they'll be knowing me too well! And if Ches Meade puts about another story, perhaps they'll believe it!"

"Don't you worry about Ches Meade and his stories," said Griselda hotly. "We know -- everyone knows -- how much truth is in them!" Boxing Ches Meade's ears is the

best thing ever you did for yourself 'round here." She cuckled, and concluded, "Ches has been needing a right good clip on the ear for a long time -- if I'd known how he was going to turn out, I'd 've given him a few a good many years ago, instead of feeling sorry for him!"

Betty laughed, but she did not change her mind. Griselda, the practical, did not completely understand her. She saw only Ches with his mocking smile and prying eyes, bringing about Betty's departure. But to Betty, Ches was not entirely a cause in himself. He represented more a stage in her disillusionment, casting a shadow over the idealism that had lighted her outlook. Behind Ches stood the others -- the decent people of the district, who, knowing Ches for what he was, could still tolerate him, laugh at his jokes when not directed against themselves. Their acceptance of Ches made the rest of the community less in her eyes, and she had not expected them to lessen, thus to lower themselves from what she had taken them to be in the beginning.

Griselda hoped until the end of June that Betty could be persuaded to change her mind. The district hoped so too. The overlapping farewells at the picnic were distinctly regretful.

"Good-bye, Miss Allen. Guess we won't be seeing you next year. We're sure sorry you ain't coming back!"

"See you tonight, Miss Allen..."

"... a lovely picnic, Miss Allen...!"

"Never seen my old lady run so fast as she done in that race!"

"...I'd stay an' help clean up the school, Miss Allen, but you know how it is -- milking..."

"Good-bye, Miss Allen!"

The golden haze of dust was settling on the playground, and a long puffy cloud marked the homeward progress of cars and buggies down the hill. A few tired, sticky children, clutching prizes won in the sports, or the notebook or pressed flower collection that had occupied a place in the display, drooped, awaiting mothers who still talked.

One by one they left and the cheerful hubbub subsided. Paper and candy wrappers littered the yard, the barn door sagged at one corner where a too-vigorous push had run it off the rollers. In forlorn silhouette, one set of jumping-poles stood bravely erect, its fellows sprawled in the sand-pit.

Betty sighed as she looked over the nearly deserted playground. Griselda looked at her sharply.

"Sure you don't want to stay?"

Betty shook her head and Griselda said no more.

I wish this girl would stay, she thought. I wish Walter had a brain in his head! I wish Ches Meade had never set foot in Rolling Slopes!

She went on to reflect that perhaps the girl was right about it being a mistake to know people too well. People were changeable. The Prices had never been at ease with Griselda since she had helped Eileen. The friendship of twenty years had not been able to weather the fact that she knew as well as they did the details of the family tragedy. And Leona Cottle, now Leona Vernon, when they met in Maverick, greeted her casually and passed by quickly. Again she knew too much... It was laid down that you should help your neighbor, but was there no getting away from the fact that the neighbor resented being helped?

"You want to come now, Betty? Henry'll pick you up later if you've got anything to do."

It was Emma's pleasant voice.

"I'll stay," said Betty hastily. "I've got stuff to collect here...."

"Don't you go cleaning up, now, Betty," said Griselda warningly. "Joe'll do that."

Griselda walked over to the car in silence. How many school picnics and concerts had she seen here at Rolling Slopes? A little straggling procession trailed out of the gate: the elder Mrs. Patchenko, her daughter-in-law, Annie and Paul, Olga and the little boys in the rear.

Griselda leaned forward to address her son-in-law.

"You got room for that woman? Henry?"

"I guess so -- Betty ain't coming. But they always walk over the lease -- it's not far."

"Never mind," said Griselda authoritatively. "She's walked it once today."

"She seems an active old woman," murmured Emma, arranging the wrappings of the baby.

Her mother looked at her with contempt. "I don't mean the old woman. Can't you see the other's expecting? You with four children of your own!"

Emma dissolved into laughter. "I never saw anyone like you for knowing these things!"

Griselda snorted, and Henry beckoned the peasant women over. They held back, pushing the children forward for the unusual treat of a car ride. Griselda addressed Annie.

"Tell your mother and grandmother, child, that Mr. Burton wants to give them a ride, not you young'uns!"

Annie interpreted, and after a question and answer in Ukranian, the two women squeezed into the back seat with Griselda. Mrs. Patchenko, although she had grown sons, still looked young. She was a gentle, merry, brown-eyed creature who smiled readily, and apparently rarely corrected any of her numerous brood when they required discipline. She was guided by her husband, by his mother, and by her children.

Docile and almost childlike, she sat now between the two implacable old women.

The elder Mrs. Patchenko was a few years older than Griselda and still a handsome woman. Her skin, seamed by a network of tiny wrinkles, was tightly drawn over the prominent bones of her face: a face for a sculptor to admire, high-boned, Slavic, with wide-spaced grey eyes, sharply chiselled nose, and pointed chin. Under the broad forehead her clear, light grey eyes looked out bleakly and accusingly upon a world to which she could not adjust her thoughts. Years before she had come as an immigrant to Canada, and desperately poor. Thus she had never had time nor opportunity to learn English correctly and fluently. She was a stranger to the ways of her adopted country and her heart was still in her homeland. A fanatical Ukranian nationalist, a supporter of the Hetman, she was intellectual, embittered, and completely uncomprehending of Canadian ways. All her hopes were bent towards the cause of the Free Ukraine. Not the least of her troubles was the fact that her easy-going son and his meek wife remained singularly unimpressed by the old woman's zeal. Their life was perfectly satisfying. The railroad paid regular money, they had food and clothing and a school for the children and no compulsory military service, and a reasonable tolerance from their neighbors.

Like their parents, Mike, Peter, and Stephan had no enthusiasm for the old ways. They too worked for the railway, or did odd jobs for the neighbors, they performed well upon the accordian and the mouthorgan and violin, and played for local dances. Their grandmother had long since given them up in disgust, listening with pursed mouth and disapproving shake of the head to their rendering of "Birmingham Jail" or the lugubrious woes of "Frankie and Johnny". They took no interest in the Free Ukraine, they had forgotten much of the language, they hung around with Ches Meade and his cronies, idling around the store, the dance hall.

Upon Annie, the old grandmother fixed her hopes. Annie was serious and contemplative, less sentimental than her mother or brothers. She listened with attention to the stories of her grandmother, spoke and read Ukranian quite well, was artistic and studious.

Old Mrs. Patchenko was thinking of Annie as she climbed into the car after the picnic. Annie was dreadfully unhappy that Miss Allen was not coming back: she had followed the teacher like a shadow all afternoon.

"I'm so sorry, Miss Allen... your pretty dress!"

"For shame, Annie!" scolded the grandmother in Ukranian, and the dark-eyed mother looked unhappy.

But the little sandy-haired schoolteacher laughed and scrubbed at the lemonade stain until it dried, a darker streak on the lilac-colored voile.

"Never mind, Annie. You couldn't help it. It'll wash -- just a cotton dress!"

Such short skirts, reflected the old woman. Not decent. And hair cropped like a boy's.. A strange, wasteful land, this of her adoption, where children ran wild, and girls dressed to show all that leg... Annie, she thought, ...a big girl now... her skirts should come down.

Beside her the plump figure of her daughter-in-law quivered with a chuckle. The fat Sammy Burton, leaning forward on his grandmother's lap, was catching at her necklace.

"Sammy!" Griselda pushed down the clutching hand. But the other woman laughed, and unwound a coil of the coral and silver. Sammy seized it, examined the bright beads with a second's pouting concentration, dropped them and leaned back. With a complaining little murmur he rubbed the back of his silky head against his grandmother.

Griselda as ever, sat up straight. Automobiles, she thought, like chesterfield suites and overstuffed chairs, made for sloppy carriage. Look at Emma! Slumped like that in spite of all the training she had.. And weight! There never used to be so many fat women, she reflected. Still

it's Emma's bones that have to carry it around, not mine!

Sammy smelt of peppermint and milk, and perhaps, a little of fresh earth. Little children often did, even when they were clean...

I wonder what this next little Patchenko will be, she thought. Girl I hope -- those boys aren't up to much, tagging around with Ches Meade .. Drat Ches.. If someone like Betty had turned up ten years ago 'stead of that Mamie, I might have been holding Walter's child on my lap! ... Mabel! She didn't stay long -- Dave Wilkie's no catch... With a sigh, Griselda recalled her straying thoughts, and fixed them once more upon the sectionman's family.

This seems like a nice, clean, good-natured woman... Not too bright, an' maybe just as well. Life's easier for a woman if she's not too bright. Then you can agree with everyone and get along fine! That old woman's a different proposition! She's seen everything, an' had a hard life -- it always shows...

For an instant the two pairs of eyes, the shrewd dark ones, and the bleak grey ones met. The glances unlocked with difficulty: each woman for the first time sensed the intensity in the other. Then the car jolted over the train tracks and stopped before the store.

"Runnin' a taxi, Henry?" inquired Ches Meade, as the four women got out." You oughta charge by weight!"

He grinned and indicated the sectionman's wife, who now had turned back towards her own home, but the tail of his eye slid mockingly towards the substantial figure of Emma. Griselda welcomed the opportunity to deliver a rebuke.

"That'll do, Ches! she said sharply. "Time you learned to hold your tongue where women are concerned!"

With a starchy rustle of her print skirts she vanished, and Ches stared blankly after her, at a loss, as always in her presence, for the glib retorts that usually came so quickly to his tongue.

The house was cool and dark with the blinds drawn, and the silence within it was complete. Griselda entered with a sigh of relief, and, taking off her hat, she thought without pain,

"The second picnic since Jasper died."

Instantly she seemed to be looking at a whole vista of school picnics, a picture of each one small and bright and clear formed in her mind, like the vista of lighted candles seen when the light is placed between two mirrors that face each other. All the school picnics of the past sixteen years, all alike in her memory. Even the last two. Had Jasper's going made no difference really? It had, of course, but the difference was an inner thing:

it did not affect the externals of a gathering like the school picnic. Jasper had always helped to judge the sports ... And the sports had gone off very well today, under the joint management of Albert Horner and Engvald Nordstaad.

"Fifty-yard dash for girls eight and nine!" had announced Mr. Horner at the top of his lungs.

"That's Solveig and Ethel and Olga.."

"Olga! Hurry!"

"Come on, young ladies! Don't keep everybody waiting!"

Flushed, anxious little girls teetering on their toes along the starting-line. Pink-and-white Solveig, tossing back her long tow braids, tipped with blue bows. Dark-eyed Ethel, in whom Griselda took an especial interest, for she had single-handed supervised Ethel's unexpectedly early arrival into the world. Olga Patchenko in an agony of shyness, smoothed down her gay print skirt and looked sideways at the others.

Olga would look like Annie, thought Griselda. Gypsy-like...

Ches Meade was official starter -- he always was. Even if he was on bad terms with Betty he could not resist the opportunity to be in the forefront of things.

"All ready? All behind the line? Move that foot back, Solveig... O.K... When you see the handkerchief drop, then run.... one....two...three...!"

The white token fluttered to the ground... a cheer... a flutter of print skirts...

"Come on, Ethel!"

"Solveig!"

"Run, Olga!"

It was over.

"Solveig first," announced Mr. Horner, "Ethel second, Olga third."

"What didja get, Solveig?"

"A blue comb."

"Isn't that pretty, now!"

Olga's dark eyes began to fill with tears at the discrepancy between her third prize of an all-day sucker, and the more substantial awards received by the others. The judges were quick to administer consolation.

"Never mind, Olga," said Albert Horner. "Next year, you'll win the race -- you see."

"I t'ink you forget to give Olga the rest of her prize," said Nordstaad with a wink. "Iss two suckers for third prize when three people run, isn't it?"

"So it is!" agreed the forgetful Mr. Horner.

"Red or yellow, Olga?"

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And there had been the cradle race, "Two and under!" The half-dozen sturdy youngsters set down in an approximately straight line and deserted by their mothers. Fat Jessie Nordstaad, steady on her stout pink legs, leading the field. The young Nordstaads were always ahead in games and sports: Jessie had doubtless been coached by her brothers and sisters for this event since she could walk. She was closely followed by Johnny Wietz, and a moment later, by Sammy Burton. But just as Sammy seemed about to overtake his rivals, he had espied Griselda in the sidelines. Instantly he veered.

"Damma! Damma!"

A shout of laughter went up, and Griselda collected her grandson and bore him away to get his prize with all the others.

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Three o'clock, and the afternoon sun at its hottest. The men in their white shirts, wrinkled now, sleeves rolled up. Many a long dusty smear on trousers carefully pressed that morning. Crisp cotton dresses wilted: a steady stream of young and old patronized the lemonade barrel, presided over by Mrs. Kerrigan in the girls' cloakroom.

A few parents and neighbors, less hardy than the

rest, came into the school, seeking a spot to sit down and cool off. Mrs. Wietz and Mrs. Murphey strolled around to look at the display of the years' work.

"My, it's pretty!"

"Yah!"

A step or two behind them, Mrs. Patchenko and her mother-in-law exchnanged gratified glances. The object in question was a drawing of a horse's head, with flaring nostrils and pouring mane. It was a poster horse, not a real one, but it was done with a dash of skill and life unusual in the work of a youthful, untrained artist. The picture was signed Annie Patchenko, and it occupied the central place of honor in the art display on the front blackboard. The two women looked at it for some minutes, murmuring softly in their native tongue. Meanwhile Mrs. Wietz had pounced gleefully upon Hilda's notebook in geography, with its neatly-lettered cover and brilliant maps. Mrs. Murphey was a little longer in finding what she sought: a somewhat sticky and bulging folder of pressed flowers. But she turned the grubby cardboard pages with as loving care as if she had never before seen them, and had not spent serious thought two days before on how to persuade that knobby black-eyed Susan to adhere to the page it was so determined to part from....

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Griselda herself had admired the picture of the

horse: she could see it from her post at the lemonade barrel and something about the rhythmic swirl of the heavy black-and-white lines of the mane, the flattened-back ears and flaring nostrils, pleased her. The thing had a look of life, and the talent that had caught and imprisoned that quality on paper intrigued Griselda. She wondered about Annie Patchenko.

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Annie herself, walking home with the younger children over the lease, stopped on the top of the hill that overlooked their house.

"Paul," she said in English. "Take the kids home."

Paul accepted the charge with good grace.

"You not comin'?"

"I'm going back to help Miss Allen."

And she turned back towards the school. Her slim sunburned hands caressed the long string of red beads -- her prize for jumping. They were almost like the ones Miss Allen wore herself, only round instead of long.

"I'll wear them with a white dress," she thought, "when I'm grown up...and a grey dress with beads on it, and a yellow blouse with long sleeves...I'll give the horse's picture to Miss Allen...I wish she wasn't going away.... Everybody likes the horse...Mrs. Kerrigan said it was good... I used to be scared of Mrs. Kerrigan but not now. Mr. Kerrigan was nice...He used to say, 'And one more peppermint be-

cause she's got brown eyes.'..."

A big grey car swooped over the crest of the hill, and drew up before the store. Behind it, the dust eddied and swirled in the light wind, drifted away over the green fields, and sank lightly to rest. Conversation in the store and among the scattering of people on the step halted for a moment.

"Who...?"

"The ranch folks..."

"His Royal Highness is with us again...!"

"Is the missus with him?"

Richard Hampton-Reid, who now descended and helped his wife out of the car, was still in his late thirties, a good-looking man. His manner was always courteous, always unconsciously withdrawn. The trait was not deliberate: he was unaware of it, and hence did nothing to correct it. Most people had the impression that he did not care: that it was all one to him if they came or went.

He was, at the present moment, extremely glad to get back to the ranch, but he was quite unable to communicate the feeling to his neighbors, who looked now at him with a mixture of interest, scorn, and reserve. The barrier was complete between them. They did not realize the simplicity of his tastes, very like their own, perhaps. They smiled a little cruelly at the gibe, "His Royal Highness": one they no longer thought of making about Mrs. Hampton-Reid.

Nevertheless Victoria was far more deserving of such a term than her husband. She still had an unshaken inner conviction of the differences between herself and the vast majority of her fellow-creatures. But such was the charm of her manner that few people realized the fact, and she was well liked, even a little pitied by her neighbors at Rolling Slopes.

She straightened her shoulders now, and looked with a smile at the watchers on the step. Instantly the smile was reciprocated, and hats were tipped that ordinarily remained on their owners' heads.

Victoria Hampton-Reid had been beautiful as a girl. Now, at thirty-two, she was breathtakingly lovely. Not even the difficult fashions of the day: the tight, short skirts, the inverted-bowl hats, could mar her beauty. Nothing could have disguised the lines of her tall figure, or spoilt the flowing grace of her every movement. Her black hair, in deference to her husband's wishes, was unbobbed, braided in a great coil at the back of her head. The perfect oval of her face, creamy-skinned, unlined, was redeemed from insipidity by her fine dark eyes, and the too-wide, too-firm mouth.

She turned and opened the back door of the car.

"Do you want to get out and speak to the little girls, dear? Ethel is over there on the step."

The child scrambled out and stood blinking in the sunlight. She had been asleep: the warm flush still lingered on her downy, freckled cheek, peach-tinted with summer tan. Like her father, she was fair, with two thick pigtails of reddish-gold hair, and gentle blue eyes.

Victoria adjusted her daughter's round straw hat, and took her by the hand. On the step the child drew away, and joined the group of little girls chattering there. Ethel turned eagerly to greet her: their summer friendship was very dear to both little girls. Solveig Nordstaad, unused to being left out stood by, hostile and watchful, waiting for an opportunity to recover her place. It soon came.

"See my pretty handky... It's a prize."

"Ethel only got second prize," said Solveig assertively. "I got first prize. Olga didn't get any, but they gave her two suckers."

Edith looked from one to the other with her gentle, confiding smile.

"You should've come early," said Ethel. "You could have gone in the race an' got a prize too."

"She couldn't get a prize," said Solveig. "She didn't practice. I practised every day at school an' at home..."

But Edith was listening to Ethel's whisper.

"We got baby kittens in the loft..."

"Why don't you wear flowers on your hat?" demanded

Solveig, tossing her long flaxen braids. Her hearers looked at the wreath of tiny flowers encircling the pale blue straw. Edith's blue eyes noted the pink-and-white striped ribbon on Ethel's tan-colored straw. Suddenly her own neat black round hat with the regulation six-inch tail of navy cord ribbon and the elastic under her chin seemed odd -- ugly, and different.

Solveig, with the quick instinctive cruelty of children, followed up her advantage.

"I got patent shoes," she said triumphantly. "You don't!"

Edith flushed miserably, and her pink mouth quivered.

"Yes I have. My best shoes are patent..."

Her tormentor giggled. "Pay-tent! Pay-tent! Don't you know it's pattent?"

Ethel stood looking from one to the other in bewilderment, and only the intervention of the big boys prevented a storm of tears.

"What're you kids making so much noise for?" demanded Eric Nordstaad, anxious to assert his authority over his troublesome younger sister and her friends. Solveig turned eagerly to her brother, certain of his support against outsiders.

"She says shoes are Pay-tent!"

Eric considered the problem briefly, reduced it to its proper place in his orderly scheme of things. "Pattent!" said he shortly, and turned away -- a big, handsome lad with a broad, clear-skinned face and blue-grey eyes. His companion, Jim Horner, a year his senior, in turn took up the matter.

"Some people say pay-tent, and some say pattent," he conceded. "I guess both are right."

"Miss Allen says pattent!...." announced Solveig triumphantly.

One of the men standing by laughed. "Atta girl, Solveig! Don't you let anybody tell you different...!"

Solveig, a little taken aback by the unexpected aid from this quarter, recovered enough to press home her advantage.

"Everybody says pattent but you. You're a baby-- You can't talk right!"

Ethel Horner came loyally to the rescue. "My mother says paytent," she protested.

There was a guffaw from the two or three men who stood by listening to the excited childish voices. Edith looked helplessly around, and her soft blue eyes began to fill.

"Baby! Cry-baby!"

"Aw, leave her alone!" Jim Horner's voice carried weight among his younger schoolfellows. Solveig looked to Eric for support, found none, and was silent. Edith and Ethel

resumed their chatter and made plans for a visit the next day. A moment or two later Edith's parents came out of the store, followed by Walter with a box of groceries.

"Come dear, we're going now. Say good-bye to Ethel."

"In the back?" asked Walter. "There..." He pushed the box into place. "So long, Dick." He was the only man in the district save Harry Wise, the old cowhand, to call Hampton-Reid by his christian name.

The grey car leaped ahead, swept up the low hill and was gone. Behind it the dust cloud drifted gently away to be lost over the green fields of grain.

The school year was over: the long, hot summer under way all over the prairies. The months that were the children's holiday were also those that decided the fate of the crops. And at the end of June there was no hint of the hardships the next few years would bring. The green fields promised a fair harvest: there was water in the sloughs and the creek, and the meadowlarks nested in the grassy strip between the store and the railway track.

Griselda caught a glimpse of the car as it turned into the lease.

"They're back," she thought absently, and dismissed the Hampton-Reid's immediately, as she had already dismissed the picnic, and the schoolchildren from her thoughts. The

younger generation, save for her own grandchildren, meant little to her now. Briefly, through Betty Allen, she had come to know something of them, and now Betty was leaving, and there was an end of Griselda's hopes for Walter.

ANNIE

Rolling Slopes did not altogether forget Betty Allen: a few people remembered her for many years. Griselda thought of her, sometimes wistfully, wishing that Betty and Walter had been able to take each seriously, sometimes with amusement at Ches Meade's discomfiture. Emma Burton maintained that she never boarded a nicer girl. Annie Patchenko was determined to grow up to be just like Miss Allen. Ches Meade remembered her with bitter resentment. She had made him a laughing-stock -- she was gone and there was no possibility of revenge and no lack of people to point out how he had at last brought ridicule on himself by his habit of ridiculing others. In fact, in the history of Rolling Slopes, Betty's real achievements as a teacher, her very genuine personal worth, faded into obscurity before her one other great

claim to distinction. She became "the schoolmarm who slapped Ches Meade's face -- right in the store!", and by and by she was part and parcel of the past.

That was the summer of the great hailstorm. In the middle of August when two weeks of burning sunshine was whitening the grain fields and cutting was ready to commence, the hail came. Before the streaked and greyish curtain of cloud ran a little cold breath of wind, an icy finger of warning that shivered the standing grain and cast a chill upon the warm earth.

"Hail, I t'ink!" said Engvald Nordstaad grimly and waited for the second binder to catch up to him. "Unhitch! " Before the teams were unhooked from the binders the first icy drops of rain were mingled with the little bounding pellets of hail.

To Mrs. Horner, nursing a fretful child, the storm came as a surprise. She had not noticed the darkening of the day until a few sharp gusts of wind pattered dust and big shapeless splotches of rain on the window panes. Then she looked out across the yard where the hens ran frantically to shelter. A dishevelled crow flapped his way aslant the wind: a few sharp-edged pellets rattled on the roof, rolled to the ground, vanished under hosts of others. The red poppy in the flower-bed snapped, the silky crimson petals floated away and were buried, as with a roar like thunder the heart of

the storm swirled aroung the buildings, curtaining with ice the world outside the windows.

Three or four minutes it lasted, then slackened, became a heavy rain, a shower, ceased. Mrs. Horner ventured outside. The Yard was nearly under water, drifts of ice slanted up behind the buildings. The garden a tattered ruin... what of the grain?

"I can't leave Ethel," she thought, her eyes on the overflowing rain-barrels, her mind, dulled for the moment by the confusion of the storm, returning to the sick child... There was infantile paralysis in the province...many cases of it...several at Maverick...

But inside the house the feverish child slept soundly, and the air was cool, almost chilly. Mrs. Horner sighed with relief.

"I'll send Jim over to the ranch," she thought. "They will be worried about Edythe. It's just a little feverish upset..." The relief was so great that she could no longer keep her own eyes open. Albert Horner and the boys came in twenty minutes later with the news that things were not so bad as they looked -- the storm had swung down the big coulee and missed the north end of the wheat, most of the oats.

"Worst hailstorm we had in years," said Albert later. "An' there was Mother, asleep on the sofa!"

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The storm was in fact but two miles wide. It missed the Wilkie's and Burton's farms altogether, took a swathe of the Kerrigan's crop, all of the Price's, two-thirds of the Nordstaad's, all but a few acres of Ches's, two thirds of George Evans', and dissipated itself in a violent rainstorm ten miles to the south-east. As it was so late in the season, there was no regrowth. Those who were hailed out made the best of the situation, cut what remained of the crops for feed, and ran livestock in the fields for the winter. Nordstaad was insured, so his total loss was slight compared to that of his neighbors who had neglected this protection.

On the whole, people were philosophical about the hail. It had come before: it would come again no doubt. And next year lay ahead. Maude Horner confided to Griselda that she thought she would put off her trip to England till next year, and it seemed to Griselda that the words were an echo from her own past. On impulse she said,

"Don't expect too much, Maude, when you go. Things change so..."

"I suppose they do," agreed the other. She looked startled, and Griselda recalled that it was less than ten years since Maude had left England. Ten years would not mean much change -- not as much as forty had, for her. When Maude had gone, she sat for a little while, trying to adjust her

thoughts and to keep a reasonable proportion between past, present and future. The whole panorama of Rolling Slopes refused to stay in focus now that she had relaxed her grasp of it. Years that had been full and busy telescoped together so that she could hardly recall them, isolated incidents stood out clearly and sharply without apparent significance. And people! Griselda could hardly recollect the features of Mrs. Olson, or Mrs. Jackson, who had been among her earliest neighbors, whom she had known well for some years. Good people, good neighbors, and their going had left no regrets with her -- now, after ten years or so, just as their physical forms left little or no impression upon her memory. A community full of Olsons and Jacksons would have been a good one, without the problems that continued to vex Rolling Slopes. It was the troublesome people that left their mark -- the Cottles, Ches Meade: the odd, unfriendly ones like Old Bill and Miss Freddie and the Hampton-Reids, that one remembered. Why?

Griselda pondered the problem and came to the conclusion that perhaps Betty Allen had answered it, Betty, with that streak of hard common sense underlying all her chatter and good fellowship. "Knowing people toowell," she had said, in effect, "makes friendship impossible." Griselda had agreed with her, reluctantly, it was true. She wondered if perhaps, knowing people too well destroyed one's interest in them,

rendered them stale and tiresome, so that the meeting of them was a task that long habit had rendered dull, and the sight of them was but the eye encountering an object that familiarity had rendered meaningless. The thought depressed her and cast a fog over her memories of the past. In an effort to shake it off, she began to look around her for some new interest.

It was no longer difficult to turn her eyes from community activities. For four years she had had little to do with them, and her interest had slackened. Having once accepted the role of a bystander she could not relinquish it, and did not particularly want to. People one at a time were all she felt she could manage now. Walter having proved himself in the last year, a particularly disappointing object of maternal solicitude, Griselda abandoned hope of seeing him married. Then her eye fell, with the old gleam of purpose in it, upon Annie Patchenko.

That was late in the fall. Griselda, looking out of her parlor window, south-west across the ball-diamond where the dust whirled in a crazy dance with bits of paper and dry grass, out towards the southern tip of the lease, saw the Patchenko children trailing forlornly homeward. They plodded silently against the wind that whipped the long dark hair about Annie's face, blew Olga's brown mane in her eyes and flapped and tugged at their clothes. It

was a grey, leaden day, with heavy clouds lowering overhead. The air was chill, a cold rain seemed imminent. But ever the clouds rolled up, rolled over, blew by,mingled on the horizon with blowing dust, and were gone, and the sky was overcast with others.

Against this grey and desolate background, the figures of the sectionman's children made a pathetic little picture. Griselda's heart was touched.

"Poor little things!" she thought. "They'll miss their mother. That old grandmother is a tartar, I'll wager!" And she went out and beckoned the children in as they passed near the back of the house.

Mrs. Patchenko, the fat, placid, brown-eyed mother had died in childbirth but a few weeks previously. Griselda was doing the elder Mrs. Patchenko but scant justice in her thoughts: the grandmother although strict, was kind enough to the children and she had assumed a heavy burden in caring for her son's household. For there were two babies, eleven-month old Ruth, and the new-born Rose, and it was no wonder if the other three little ones were at times left to their own devices. They turned to Annie for comfort, and it was Annie's suggestion on this occasion that they go to see the cattle drive start off from the southern lease.

But the start of the drive had not been a bit exciting, and they had seen it for three years before, always the same. Two riders and a man with a wagon and team, the

restless, bawling herd being urged out of the lease, on a side road...Old Harry Wise, always friendly to them, whose crippled leg and sixty years kept him on the ground now, was absent , supervising the departure of the cattle from the range north of the tracks. The children were completely ignored, and they turned homewards almost in silence.

Griselda gave them cocoa and bread and jam and noted with approval that they all said "Thank you." The three younger ones, Paul, Olga, and Myron, sat quietly, eating and observing, but Annie, is response to questioning, talked quite freely.

"How are you getting on at school, child?" inquired Griselda, and to her surprise, Annie's eyes filled with tears. She sat miserably silent, trying to swallow her last bite of bread and jam. Paul clarified the situation briefly.

"Granma says Annie's got to quit school an' help at home."

Griselda's sympathy was instantly with the girl: it was a curious compound of many factors. There was her own effort to get that school established: there was the memory of her own disappointment when Emma had refused to go on with the education for which her mother had been so ambitious: there was the recollection of the stern old Ukranian woman dominating her gentle daughter-in-law --

was it only a few months ago? And there was too the recollection of Jasper's partiality for Annie, and Annie laying her bouquet of marigolds and golden-rod on Jasper's grave, and Annie standing solemn-eyed on the cinders as the train drew in and Griselda, stepping off, knew she had come home.

Griselda made up her mind in the instant before she said, without committing herself,

"What does your father say about it?"

Annie was still incapable of speech, and Olga showed a tendency to mingle her tears with her sister's. Paul replied,

"Says he guess she'd better."

The cocoa was all finished, and the bread and jam. Annie, embarrassed and unhappy, seemed about to collect her charges and go. Griselda sacrificed the lemon pie she had intended for supper to the urgency of the occasion, and with the young Patchenkos under her eye for another ten minutes, addressed Annie.

"Don't you want to leave school?"

"No."

The lemon pie was going down with difficulty: the child was obviously overwrought.

"And no wonder," said Griselda to herself, "them all against her!" She recalled how highly Betty Allen had spoken of Annie: the picture of the horse's head... The child

had talent...

"Don't cry, child," she said briskly to Annie. "I'll speak to your father and grandmother. Maybe you can finish out this year at school after all."

Speak she did, and effectively. Peter Patchenko was not hard to convince: he agreed with Griselda quite amiably that it was a pity that Annie should leave school, and that it would be a good thing for her to go on and finish. Griselda was quite sure that he then went home and agreed with his mother that Annie ought to stay home and help with the care of the children. The next day she paid a call on old Mrs. Patchenko.

She dressed for the occasion with especial care, putting on a dark silk dress that she had bought nearly two years previously, when she and Jasper had been planning the trip east. She selected the least plain of her hats, and as she pinned the jet and ivory brooch that she always wore on state occasions at her throat, she admitted to herself with grim amusement the real reason for this unwonted aplendor.

"Might as well show her that I can back up my promises I make about the girl's schooling!"

She encountered the opposition she had expected, but it was of an unusual order. Mrs. Patchenko's command of English, always an unknown quantity, proved an obstacle that Griselda could not surmount. She had a feeling that the Ukranian

woman knew more than she admitted, understood more than she was willing to reveal. Mrs. Patchenko sat with a puzzled frown on her brow, shaking her head at intervals, murmuring noncommittally in low syllables that might have been any language. Her wide-spaced, light grey eyes never left Griselda's face, never lost their accusing expression. And Griselda, repeating her argument in the simplest language she could muster, began to lose patience. Finally she rose to go, determined to come again when Peter Patchenko himself was at home, or one of the older boys to interpret. And at that moment she caught an unmistakable expression of triumph in the pale eyes of the implacable opponent. It was fleeting, but it had been there. Griselda was angry.

"She's understood me all along!" she thought, and was about to speak angrily. The other woman, half a head shorter, stood silently, looking up at her. Her frail shoulders were a little stooped with age, under the high forehead, her grey eyes were bleak and wary. Griselda looked at her steadily, in silence, looked away, noting that the room was immaculately clean. The nickel on the stove shone, the windowpanes glittered. The two babies slept peacefully in the inner room, and on the back of the stove a large cooking pot bubbled gently. If old Mrs. Patchenko was hard on Annie, she was hard on herself too. It could not be easy to keep house for the men, control the lively children, feed them, raise two babies,

and keep everything so clean. If Annie had ambition and tougher fibre than her parents and brothers, here surely was the source of it -- this thin, inarticulate, grey little woman, with the wide brow and melancholy, accusing eyes.

The angry words that Griselda had felt impelled to speak died unuttered. Instead she said,

"You people come out here where the law gives you good schools for your kids, and then you don't use them. You should keep Annie in school."

A look of consternation crossed the face of the other. She took a step forward, caught Griselda by the sleeve.

"The law? Is it the law?"

For a moment Griselda was puzzled. "The law? Oh, yes, the law says you should send your kids to school."

Mrs. Patchenko attempted to look resigned, but there was fear lurking behind her eyes.

"Annie..." she muttered. "All right..."

She said a few words in Ukranian, broke off as first one of the babies began to wail and then the other.

Griselda went home, doubtful of the success of her mission. A few days later Walter asked her,

"Did you threaten old Mrs. Patchenko with the law, if she didn't send Annie to school?"

"No such thing!" said Griselda indignantly. "I just said it was a pity that they didn't take advantage of

the schools that this country had by law!"

Walter laughed. "Whatever you said, it scared her stiff. She expects the police out every minute, by what Pete told me."

"Oh, for heaven's sake...! Explain it to him, Walter!"

"I did, but they still think Annie has to go to school."

"Well," said Griselda thoughtfully. "It seems a pity to tell that old woman any different!"

"That's what I thought." agreed Walter.

"And when all the other children here will likely go on to high school, Annie ought to have her chance too."

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THIRTY-FOLD

Although the chances had seemed against Annie Patchenko's higher education in 1929, she was the only one from the upper grades of Betty Allen's school to complete high school. For that fall brought the news of disaster from the big cities, the money-markets of the world. Within a few months, the world-wide financial collapse, like a widening whirlpool, sucked in Western Canada. The wheat market crashed, and the farmers of Rolling Slopes, a handful among thousands, saw their accustomed prosperity vanish, their economy in ruins. The depression was upon them: their world narrowed and contracted and shrank until it was but the patch of prairie bounded by the flat circle of the horizon.

So ended a discouraging year. The hail had devastated many crops, and those which escaped suffered from drought. For weeks the wind blew steadily, rattling and prying about the buildings, sucking the life from the grain, the green from the leaseland. The dried, curled leaves of Griselda's little hedge fell early, blew wildly around the tall white house, lodged in little piles, scattered in the gusts. Roadsides and pastures were brown in July, the creek in the leaseland fell lower than ever before, and the coulee bottoms were dry all summer. Late in October came a great duststorm, darkening the sky in mid-afternoon -- the first of many.

At the end of the season, as for years following, there was little sale for the grain that survived the hail and drought, low prices for the livestock. People who had bought land when prices were high, found themselves with heavy mortgage payments to meet and no income in sight. Those who had homesteaded in the beginning, kept their land and added to it, were comparatively well off, provided they were reasonably debt-free. But they were few in number, for the easy credit of the past decade had induced heavy spending, lavish instalment buying, counting always on the next year's crop to pay. At Rolling Slopes, only four families weathered the

depression, the Kerrigans, the Burtons, the Wilkies, and the Nordstaads. Most did not. Within the first two years, the Prices, the Evanses, the Horners, and Ches Meade found themselves submerged.

1930, like its predecessor, was dry and windy. Even during the winter the dust blew from overtilled fields, blackened the snow-drifts and turned the winter landscape to arid grey monotones. The very land seemed to have turned against its possessors, determined to drive them from its surface. And some, who had not a firm grip upon their slice of the stubborn prairie, left, scattering to the north and west, east, and south as though driven before the wind. Rumors of better conditions elsewhere whirled in the air like withered leaves.

"They say it's not so bad at the coast -- don't have these cold winters an' coal to buy, an' lumber's cheap... Fruit in your backyard..."

Or, "I'm goin' to try the irrigation districts -- they say there's work to be had there, 'specially at harvest time... Grow all kinds of stuff there, you know..."

Once again there was talk of the Peace River, of the north, where one could trap in the winter and make a living at least, where moose could be shot for meat, and wild fruit picked, and there was firewood for the cutting...

Ches Meade was among those who abandoned their farms. His quarter-section of grey and arid soil was blowing heavily, like the acres of his neighbor Evans. The gravel showed on the top of all the little hills, the dust banked up in rippled billows along the roadside ditches, and crossed the road to lie in a long sandy sweep for many yards across Nordstaad's field.

The big Norwegian was furious when some acres of his latest experiment -- flax -- were buried beneath the drifted soil from Ches's and Evans' summerfallow. He had more land than most of his neighbors, and had not overworked his fields. A tireless worker, he flung all his resources and those of his family into the struggle for survival and independence, and won. His dustiest field he sowed to grass, and increased his milk herd. A few acres of alfalfa here, a hundred acres strip-farmed there, a long dug-out in the coulee to store water for the livestock...such were Nordstaad's experiments during the dry years, and each of them contributed a little towards enabling him to hold his own.

Dave Wilkie and Henry Burton followed his example, with variations of their own. Dave rode out the depression on the proceeds from his poultry: a row of neat little chicken-houses went up along the edge of his barnyard, and each week he shipped out big 30-dozen crates of eggs. In

1931, his nephew, Tony Wilkie, came out from England, a shy, foreign-looking boy of eleven. Dave did not welcome the boy's arrival: in a moment of ill-temper he let slip the reason.

"...useless, no-good little Dago -- like his father...!"

Which made abundantly clear Tony Wilkie's status in his uncle's family. But Mabel was kind to the boy, and as Tony proved himself an admirable poultryman, Dave became reconciled to the presence of his unwanted nephew.

In the summer of 1931 it was obvious that the crops would again be poor - perhaps five or six bushels to the acre. That was the summer Ches Meade left Rolling Slopes. He did not advertise his intentions. He had rented his farm to George Evans on shares for the next year, and he had no set plans for the future. The grasshoppers leaped away in all directions through the weeds as he walked slowly down the railway track. Their jagged flight was a continuous dry clicking. . . the weeds all bent to the south, faded, brittle, brown. . . Up ahead on the box cars half a dozen men sat or sprawled. . . They were always there. . . and on the big trains, fifty or sixty or more. . .

The train pulled away from the siding at Rolling Slopes, entered the lease. A thin brown grass, cropped to

the roots, covered the little hills. The dried-out crops were not so very different in tone: to the south the monotony of the whole was broken only by the thin silver spire of the windmill tower on the southern lease - the well that Joe Griggs had located with a willow fork. Eastwards the grain elevators of Rolling Slopes jutted up, stark and angular, an ironic comment on the changed economy of the prairies. Grain - the land had been forced to grow grain, to carry the grain came the railroad, to store it, the elevators. And now there was no grain, no market. . .

Only a dried-out prairie, thought Griselda, watching the train out of sight as she did so often now. Only dusty farms, a railroad running deeper into debt with every mile, empty elevators, and people who stayed because they must. Because there was nothing else to do - the depression was everywhere and no one could afford to move . . .

The train rounded a curve and slid out of sight. The sound of it mingled with the rush of the wind, the flapping of a loose shingle on the verandah roof. She would not see it again for two days - the train that had come once more to assume such importance in the lives at Rolling Slopes. It carried little freight now, little grain, a few cattle. It crept through a starved land, bare and withered in summer,

grey and bleached in winter. Yet the railway meant more than ever to those who lived along it. It was their link with the outside world: it had outlasted the automobiles that were steadily diminishing in number because people could not afford them... The railway proved that the outside world existed and denied their near-isolation.

Griselda sighed. Life was dull, she thought. Dull with a dullness that she had never known before. She felt again that she was adrift upon the prairie. . . And such a prairie - the parched leaseland, the scarred and drifting summerfallow, the shrivelled crops. Crop and fallow and pasture all alike, all lifeless. The hopeful land, the promise of the past -- where had it gone?

Impatiently she snapped on the radio. A twangy tenor voice floated out,

> "Home, home on the range!
> Where the deer and the antelope play
> Where never is heard a discouraging word,
> And the skies are not cloudy all day..."

"Tcha!" snorted Griselda. She snapped the radio off again, just as Emma entered the room.

"What's the matter with Wilf?" said Emma teasingly. "Don't you like him, Mother?"

"They drowned the wrong kitten when they kept <u>him</u>," said Griselda with a vindictive look at the radio.

"Beats me why people bother with that contraption -- seems like you're all afraid of a little silence nowadays!"

"You're not used to it, " replied her daughter. "Have you heard the new program -- comes on at one o'clock?"

"Yes," said Griselda, who was listening regularly to the program in question, muttering acid, sotto-voce comments the while, "That woman ought to be in a home for delinquent girls -- that's what!"

Emma laughed and Griselda looked at her suspiciously. She was never quite sure how serious was Emma's professed interest in the 'soap-opera'. Emma might be just drawing her out -- she had never, she reflected, known Emma <u>too well</u>.

"What are you knitting?" asked Emma.

"A sweater for Annie," replied Griselda spreading out the scarlet wool.

"It's pretty," observed her daughter, "but it'll make her look more like a gypsy than ever!"

"Annie looks well in red!" said Griselda indignantly. "That old grandmother of hers makes her wear these dull colors and <u>then</u> she looks sallow.

Emma laughed. "Now Mother! You've changed! Remember how you used to make <u>me</u> wear dull colors and navy blue serge that didn't do a thing for me?"

"Made you look thinner!" said Griselda with spirit. Emma agreed cheerfully that perhaps it had been so. She went on to speak about the school and the Sunday School.

"The minister's district has been enlarged again -- he may not get out here at all."

"What's that mean? Church at Bell Creek only?"

Emma assented. "I hate to see the Sunday School go -- we could keep it up on our own, I suppose. How did you manage when it first started here?"

"You've changed!" said Griselda. "Do you remember telling me before you got married that the community could run itself -- you weren't going to bother about the church and club and all that?"

The color heightened in Emma's face, making her look like an overgrown schoolgirl.

"I guess I did," she admitted. "Things look different now, don't they? There's Henry -- I must go."

"Count that before you go," said Griselda, handing over the knitting. "Twenty-nine stitches -- my eyes are bothering me."

The scarlet knitting did bother her eyes, but it was a relief to turn back to it after gazing out of the window across the desolate fields. It was a relief too, to think of Annie: there might be a future for Annie such as she

had dreamed of for Emma years before. Emma had refused the future her mother had decreed for her, had thrown in her lot with Rolling Slopes, and had not regretted it. Griselda had long since forgiven her daughter for the disappointment she had caused. All she thought of now was that it had been hard to get for Emma the education that the girl had never used. So far as Annie was concerned, it was ridiculously easy. The fear of the law, quite accidentally suggested to Mrs. Patchenko had settled the question.

"Poor old lady!" reflected Griselda, neglecting to take into account the fact that Annie's grandmother was not much older than she was herself. "She was scared -- it did seem too bad, but it all worked out for the best."

Mrs. Patchenko had notput further difficulties in the way of Annie's subsequent education. Griselda had spoken to friends in Maverick and found a home where the girl could work for her board and go to school. Over the summers she worked and earned a little money for books and clothes: Ten dollars a month in wages went further than it would have done a few years before. Griselda planned ahead,

"If she could get a job at the ranch some summer ... learn a lot that she'll never get here in Rolling Slopes..."

The idea remained and grew, and two years later Annie did work for two months at the ranch. Victoria, who

had seen the girl grow up, summer by summer, from a brown-skinned, dark-eyed, bare-legged child, was at first a little dubious about taking her into the household. She appealed to Griselda for a reference, and Griselda replied honestly,

"Well, it was my idea -- her asking you for a job. But I thought you could do with a girl, and she needs the job. You needn't worry about taking her into the house."

She paused, and her concern and affection for Annie gave her next words a note of appeal that was rare with her.

"Seemed to me it would do Annie good to live with you folks for a while. She's spent all her life out here in the country -- here an' Maverick."

Victoria felt the implied compliment and realized its honesty, coming from this source. But more than that, she was moved by the note of appeal: so often, in her encounters with Griselda, it had been the other way around, with Griselda dispensing advice.

"I do believe she is asking a favor!" she thought, and the usual easy graciousness of her manner flowed back to replace the constraint she had felt for so long when in Mrs. Kerrigan's presence.

For by that time Victoria had lived at the ranch for over a year, and was reconciled to living there until

conditions improved. The depression had struck heavily at the ranch: the dry weather reduced the grazing, and prevailing low prices kept the returns from cattle very small indeed. 1932 had been a dreadful year, a windy year. Each summer day came regally into being, a splendour of color, of gold and crimson, rose and purple, flaming across the wide, wind-swept sky in the cool dawn. Red and angry the sun rose, and as it climbed, the colors faded and the tattered clouds began to move. No great rush of wind began the day, but intermittent gusts, pauses of stillness, little puffs and whirls of dust, a stronger gust, and another. Then the wind was up and within the hour a moving, dun-colored cloud hid the horizon in all directions, dark at the base, thinning at the top, until, a third of the way to the zenith, the blue sky showed, and the coppery sun.

The Hampton-Reids had not been able to keep up two establishments. One had to go, and Victoria had hoped in 1931 that it would be the ranch. The days of the privately-owned ranch were over, she thought -- had been over when they came to the country ten years before. But Dick could not, or would not see it. The ranch meant so much to him. His interest in it had restored his health after the war ... what would losing it mean to him? The old obsessions might return.

So, with a good grace, Victoria made her choice and came to live on the ranch. The house at the coast was rented

and the negligible income from it went towards saving the situation at the ranch.

Victoria was not unhappy there but she was bored. Although she refused to take an active part in the women's club, she helped out with the Sunday School and with any matter concerning the school. She was a member of the School Board for two years, and thanks to her efforts, the teacher's salary at Rolling Slopes did not fall below seven hundred dollars. It had taken two cuts since the days of Betty Allen--in fact since Dave Wilkie became Chairman of the board, in 1931. He proceeded to put school affairs in order with a heavy hand, and the lowering of salary with the consequent fall in school tax rate met with the tacit approval of his neighbors. They did not like Dave, but they gave him full credit for being a good business man. Victoria's attitude was considered unrealistic and totally unnecessary. Were there not teachers and to spare, willing and anxious to teach for six hundred, or five hundred, or even four hundred dollars a year if need be? Pick one of them -- or let them bid for the school -- lowest to get it.

Thanks to Victoria, none of these schemes of economy were put into effect, and the salary remained -- nominally, at least -- at seven hundred. Depression, on the whole, made for good teaching, and the Hampton-Reids were a little surprised to find that their daughter's spelling and arithmetic

improved materially while she lived at the ranch, even if her music suffered, and French was forgotten. She went into the same class as Ethel Horner, her inseparable friend, and Solveig Nordstaad whose white-gold hair was now cut short in a 'bang' above her clear blue eyes, and Olga Patchenko, who was so like Annie. The boys in the class were Douglas Burton and Tony Wilkie.

Edythe talked to her mother about the school. She liked Olga Patchenko because she could draw, and Solveig only sometimes... Douglas Burton was 'all right, I guess, Mother', and she was sorry for Tomy.

"Why?" asked Victoria.

Tony, explained her daughter, was scared of his uncle. And he said never mind about her English accent -- she'd get over it -- he did. He used to have an English accent and the boys laughed at him and called him 'sissy' because he couldn't play baseball. Until he had a fight with them because they threw a dead gopher at him and got blood all over his face. Tony, it appeared, did not like blood.

"Little savages!" said Victoria. She scrutinized them sharply when she met them for a few weeks afterwards. They looked like very ordinary children. But Tony was scared of his uncle, and Victoria did not find it hard to defy Dave Wilkie over the salary issue, reflecting meanwhile that she was glad she had not to deal often with him. With the deep

furrow of ill-temper between his heavy sandy brows, his hulking shoulders and close-set eyes, he was a formidable opponent.

Victoria kept Tony Wilkie in mind, and from thinking of him, she began to think about other of the local children. The young Burtons were solid, reliable, decent lads... So were the young Horners, Jim and Ted. The young Nordstaads were perhaps more interesting, with something of their father's driving energy. And Solveig promised to grow up a Norse beauty--a true snow-maiden. The Patchenkos too were different, and she knew them the best of all.

She was very kind to Annie while the girl worked there. She appreciated more keenly than Griselda the girl's artistic ability and was more in sympathy with Annie's desire to improve her talent. But like Griselda, she fully realized how little scope there was for such a talent in the year 1933--a talent utterly without training, one which might never amount to genius. Annie must, under the circumstances, be able to support herself. Victoria added her voice to Griselda's in urging Annie to select an occupation which would provide for her future.

In the fall of 1933, Annie left Rolling Slopes to commence her nurse's training in a Calgary hospital. Griselda felt a strong sense of satisfaction in the way things had worked out. She had planned for Annie's education, and Annie was educated. She had hoped for a career for Annie,

and the girl was embarked upon her nurse's training. Twice she had introduced Annie into the right sort of homes, where she could learn something and at the same time be useful to others. Her concentration upon Annie had lasted for four years: for every step of the way she could see results.

Inevitably there followed the thought that Annie no longer needed her. She had done her utmost to make Annie independent, and now she, too, was unnecessary to the girl. Pushing under the feeling of panic, akin to that which had followed Jasper's death, Griselda looked around her, at Rolling Slopes, at those upon whom she had so decisively turned her back--how long ago?

DEPRESSION

The picture was far from cheerful. Rolling Slopes, after five years of drought and high winds was virtually a desert. The dry years had left their mark everywhere: the grass and grain grew thin and scant on slopes and in hollows of all the little hills, the last coats of paint had weathered and chipped on the buildings. Animals in the fields were gaunt and rough-coated. The fences of those same fields sagged, or lay flat where the blown tumbleweed and russian thistle had lodged in the wires and gathered a weight of drifting dust too great for the frail fenceposts to support. And all around, in the fields, along the roadsides, even on the lease, erosion had exposed the subsoil, laid bare the gravel, the stony skeleton of the land.

Other things had been laid bare too. Smouldering dislikes burst into open enmity with bitter words and threats. In 1933 Nordstaad accused Ches Meade and George Evans of stealing wheat from his granary. They denied it angrily, yet the accusation seemed likely to be true. Ches Meade was back from his unproductive wanderings and much the worse for them. Soiled, shabby, with little of his old jaunty assurance, he had now a furtive, hang-dog air that did not speak well for his honesty. He had taken to hunting coyotes with a pack of four half-starved hounds that had raided Dave Wilkie's chicken pens more than once. George Evans usually accompanied Ches on these hunts. He too had given up the struggle and was content to live on relief without further exerting himself. One winter they trapped skunks -- their excuse for approaching their neighbors' granaries where these animals might be found. In vain Doris Evans protested her husband's unsavoury occupation: the best she could do was to make him change his clothes before he entered the house after half-a-day's skinning. This operation was performed outside Ches's shack, which for years after was redolent of skunk. Ches and Evans were a most unpopular pair.

Over the bad years, too, the real fibre of people became evident. Some hardened and toughened, others disintegrated. There was little to look forward to. The inward life of the community was not that of its first years of isolation,

twenty years earlier, when people were young and ambitious and full of hope. Now they were middle-aged, many of them apathetic, accepting the present because there was no future. Economically they slid ever further behind, some swamped in the morass of debts accumulated in the easy-money years of the '20's, others, from solvency went into debt, from prosperity sank to the bare subsistence level.

The old lines of division in the district changed, ran together to form a deep score that divided those on relief from those who still remained independent. Which side paid the dearest for its position is hard to say.

The Price's went on relief early. They had never really gone ahead -- now they ceased to try. And in 1933 Mrs. Price had the breakdown that might have been the result of inner turmoil. Griselda visited her, found her always the same, turning over the pages of a newspaper or an Eaton's catalogue with her calloused hands, glancing unseeingly at the pages, and whispering sometimes,

"Bargains! Bargains!"

She looked timidly at her visitors, greeted them as bidden by her husband.

"Say 'hello' to Mrs. Kerrigan, Mother...!"

"Hello!"

The voice was a mere whisper, the scared eyes were strained and wild, and only when the work-worn hands

clutched the catalogue again was she tranquil.

"Bargains! Bargains!"

Griselda was dreadfully shaken. Not since Jasper's death had she felt so alone. This poor, futile woman had been a part of Rolling Slopes nearly as long as she had herself, had been as nearly her friend as any woman of her own age ever became. Mrs. Price had depended upon Griselda in her time of greatest need. She would never need Griselda again--would never, perhaps, need anyone again. She had broken out of the tight ring of interlocking human joys and needs and sorrows. She was dead, without having died.

Her husband too had aged. He followed Griselda to the door after each visit, his eyes mutely beseeching, a pitiful shambling old man.

"It's good for her to have visitors," he said, for by common consent this fiction was maintained. "Good of you to come -- knew we could depend on <u>you</u>. Never used to think it would be like this -- she was a smart, pretty girl... Never thought it would turn out this way...!"

Griselda forgave him all his faults -- all his blundering slowness, his pessimism, his grumbling, and his thick-headed opposition to school for girls. Blundering and thick-headed he might be; he had domineered over his wife all her married life, but was tender and patient with her now. That now, of all times, he should remember the 'smart,

pretty girl', spoke well for Andy Price.

Again she puzzled over the Prices. Somewhere along the way she had discarded her old classification of people into 'no-goods' and 'worthwhiles'. The Prices fitted into neither: they were good, but spineless, well-meaning and helpless. Where did such people belong in the scheme of things? And, for that matter, what was the scheme of things?

The next year Mrs. Price was sent to the asylum, and Griselda was relieved of the task of visiting her. She had always shrunk from it, but never thought of neglecting it, even though each visit hammered home anew the consciousness of old age, of change and decay, and one other thought, worst of all.

"Suppose -- I went like that...?"

She aged rapidly in the early '30's. Her abundant iron-grey hair whitened, and she grew somewhat deaf. An electrical hearing aid adequately compensated for her loss of hearing and she detested sympathy on that score, as on any. She was wont to declare with spirit that having her hearing aid was better than having the natural use of her ears.

"This way, I can pull out the plug and cut off all the gabble and giggle if I've a mind to! And that radio that folks think such a sight of!"

She frequently had a mind to, for she admitted that she found a good many things and most people tiring.

She lived to herself a great deal: something of the impatience and intolerance of her earlier years broke through the carefully-imposed discipline of years, and Griselda ceased to suffer fools kindly. When the conversation ceased to interest her, or if she disapproved of the turn it was taking, out came the plug and she retired into grateful silence.

Apart from the loss of her hearing, she kept her health well until 1935. Then a perplexing dimness of sight was diagnosed as cataract and she underwent an operation that failed to restore the sight of the affected eye. She bore the disappointment philosophically, grateful that she still had one eye. But in 1936 that too began to cloud.

Griselda struggled with growing panic. She told herself that it was not so: that the windows needed cleaning, that it was the blowing dust that obscured the distant hills and greyed the world outside the windows. Yet she could not deceive herself, and the fog thickened over her sight. People's faces became vague blurs of ligher color than their hair: objects were dimmed. She lost little things and could not find them: she had to stop sewing and to try to knit by touch -- a skill that she had never acquired in her youth. Nor could she see for herself that the crop that year was better than it had been for seven years, that the land was green once more, that people's faces were hopeful again and the lines of worry less deeply graven.

"It won't be a good crop," said Emma Burton to her mother, "but it's better than it's been. If only we get rain in July, it'll be all right."

"I wish I could see it," said Griselda wistfully. "All I can remember for so long now is dust, and dried-out crops and the grasshoppers jumping ....This might be the last summer I'll ever see!"

"Nonsense, Mother!" replied Emma. "You'll have your operation and be seeing as good as ever you did. And they say the dry years are really over for a spell -- we might have crops again."

She went away and Griselda stood by her front-room window looking out. She knew what was there: the road, the grain elevators, the rolling grassland to the west, the fenced fields to the east. But it no longer came sharply to her inner vision. That too seemed clouded like all she gazed on -- the prim room behind her, and the yard outside, and the faces of the people she had known for years - even the faces of her own children.

"I'll never have that operation," she thought with sudden prescience.

She turned from the window and stumbled against the chair she had forgotten. Her hand came down on the little table nearby -- it held, but the plant on it fell to the floor and rolled in its pot. Griselda felt for it

with her toe, bent to pick it up, and caught her forehead sharply against the corner of the window sill.

It was too much. She burst into tears.

Everything that had oppressed her over the last few years surged up in a great flood of bitterness and misery. She was alone, and helpless, and old. Old.....

.....

She would have died rather than admit that she welcomed the coming of Mrs. Priddle. With the arrival of the housekeeper, the household entered upon a period of fluctuating warfare that lasted on and on, a perpetual drawn battle between two worthy antagonists.

Mrs. Priddle was a 'find', probably the only housekeeper and practical nurse in circulation who could deal with the situation. A bustling, beady-eyed Cockney in her fifties, she was sufficiently devoid of delicacy and sensitive feeling not to mind Griselda's attacks. She bore with them in impervious good-humor: her life had been hard, and she was shrewd enough to realize that a well-paid job like this was hard to get.

Griselda, after a fashion, welcomed Mrs. Priddle, even if she did not realize it. She opposed the engagement of the housekeeper, was barely civil to her for months, and, at her worst, outrageously rude. But Mrs. Priddle was at

least a tangible force to beat against -- real and human and articulate, the kind of opponent that Griselda understood. Here at last was opposition that might be reduced, instead of the burdensome weight of abstracts -- sorrow and old age and human nature gone awry. Arguments with Mrs. Priddle occupied many a moment that she would have spent brooding. A triumph over Mrs. Priddle gave zest to a dull day, and varying suspicions of Mrs. Priddle to be investigated kept alert Griselda's curiosity and interest. If her world of the moment shrank and dwindled to the four walls of the house, her memory was unusually active. She began to re-live the past, bringing up happenings of long ago, people long since dead.

Her neighbors came to see her, and rarely a day went by that some woman on her trip to the store did not drop in. Mrs. Horner came often: she was Griselda's favorite among the younger women. Mabel Wilkie came too, with her little son, whose birth after his parents had been married for fourteen years, was considered as something of a miracle. Certainly his mother considered it so: much of her girlish prettiness had returned, and for the first time in her life she had a pleasing animation of expression. Dave Wilkie too, big and burly and hard as granite as he had become, was wont to regard his child with awe, and his wife with a

consideration that was quite new. A third person took a deeper interest in the Wilkies than might have been suspected. Griselda felt herself absolved of an old guilt, now that Mabel Wilkie was happy.

Olga Patchenko came occasionally. Four years younger than her sister, she had succeeded to Annie's place in the same household in Maverick, and was doing well at school. Doris Evans came too: with the passing of the years she had developed the look of her mother, anxious and harried. The Evanses too had gone on relief quite early. Evans turned in his vouchers at the store with a furtively apologetic manner, and Doris, if it fell to her to do it, with her head high and a red spot blazing dully on her sallow cheeks.

Yet Doris continued to cling to Griselda, perhaps because she had always known her and depended on her, perhaps because her friendships with other women had fallen off. With Mrs. Horner Doris was moderately friendly: towards Emma, she was now resentful. The Burtons had never gone on relief: they like the Nordstaads and the Wilkies had weathered the depression, older, poorer, tired, but with self-respect undiminished and pride unimpaired.

Doris came quite often to visit Griselda, and the latter bore with her for a time, then pulled out the plug to disconnect her hearing apparatus. Oddly enough, Doris

did not seem to take offence, and the other analyzed this curious forbearance and was exasperated by it.

"She's sorry for me! Her! Sorry for me!"

The plug snicked out, as soon as Griselda fancied she detected a note of pity. In the fall of 1936, the situation abruptly reversed itself. George Evans, riding on a tractor with Ches Meade, was killed in its overturn on the steep grade of the road two miles north of the store. Ches had jumped clear, so went his tale, but George Evans, held by the flapping skirts of his loose coat, had been pinned under the heavy machine at the foot of the grade. They had gone too near the loosely-packed edge of the high grade in avoiding cattle on the road.

But when a carload of men summoned by the frantic Ches raced to the scene of the accident, there were no cattle on the road. Ches, shaken by the tragedy, swore there had been, and there were tracks in the earth to prove it. None had seen Old Bill Lilly round up the steers and put them back into the lease whence they had strayed: he was mending the fence when the men arrived, his small, stooped, ragged figure bent doggedly to the task, his little glittering eyes never straying to the upturned tractor on the roadside just over the coulee. Asked if he had witnessed the accident, he snarled, muttered, "Naw!" and spat, turning abruptly away

from interrogation to shamble back into his shack.

Ches's account of the accident was accepted. It was, in fact, the truth, and only Ches's reputation as a liar and prankster cast for some minds a fog of suspicion over the affair. Doris Evans, who had quarreled with her husband constantly during their married life, now indulged in paroxysms of grief. She poured out her woes to Griselda, who, patient for once, heard her out and uttered the conventional words of sympathy.

She did not attend Evans' funeral service in the Bell Creek Church, nor the interment in the Rolling Slopes Cemetery. Almost everyone else in Rolling Slopes went, even Mrs. Priddle, who departed, black-gloved and decorous, with admonitions over her shoulder.

"Now don't you go tryin' to work round the 'ouse while I'm gone. The coffee-pot's on the back of the stove to keep 'ot for you, an' there's a cup with the cream an' sugar in it on the table when you want yer coffee..."

"I'm quite capable of looking after myself, Priddle," said Griselda icily. "One would think I was deficient, the way you take on!"

She raised a hand to disconnect the earphones as she spoke, intending to ensure that the last word was her own. But the door closed with a bang that gave the honors to Mrs. Priddle. Griselda looked indignantly towards it.

"That old Priddle....!"

The muttered words lacked conviction. There was no satisfaction in such a retort unless Mrs. Priddle heard it. She sat quietly, thinking now about the funeral, trying to build up a picture of it in her own mind.

The pall-bearers were Walter, Ches (in spite of Doris's protests, he had been included when the Price boys made arrangements for the funeral), the two Price boys, Doris's brothers, Albert Horner, and Henry Burton.... That was all clear enough except that she could not recollect the faces of Bert and Jack Price very well... Minna Nordstaad would be wearing her navy-blue hat... It was only two years old... Nordstaad had had a bit of crop in 1934 and done well on his venture into flax... Maude Horner, of course, would wear her old brown coat... short and shapeless as they wore them in 1928... That was the year Griselda came back from the east, the year after Jasper died, and Eileen Price got into trouble... Eileen....then Mrs. Price.... now Doris..

"What's the matter with that family?"

She had spoken aloud and the sound of her own voice surprised her. She thought vaguely about Eileen Price. Eileen had married, and her husband had done well, keeping his job throughout the depression. Doris, with a note of wondering bitterness in her voice, had told Griselda this.

Eileen had two children and lived in town. Eileen had broken all the rules and gotten away with it. How did some people manage that? wondered Griselda, pouring out her coffee. How did they manage to eat their cake and have it too, while others, who kept all the laws and the Ten Commandments, and did their best by the Beatitudes, were continually perplexed, always anxious?

Paradoxically there was a certain comfort in the thought of Eileen. For in 1935, on one of her visits to the oculist, Griselda had seen Eileen. Or rather, Eileen had seen her -- her vision was not very good, and she would never have recognized the girl with the baby carriage. But Eileen had stopped and spoken.

"Hello, Mrs. Kerrigan," said Eileen. "I thought it was you when I came out of the store."

Her voice was a little guarded, a little flat, as if, thought Griselda, she had not really wanted to speak -- had forced herself to do it. She replied cordially,

"You're looking well, Eileen. What do you call the baby?"

"Glenn," replied the other. "My little girl's Sharon -"

She broke off, resumed abruptly.

"I wanted to thank you for going to see Mother when--

when -- she was sick at home."

"I--" began Griselda, "she - she was -- she's an old friend of mine, you know. Is she any better, Eileen?"

Eileen shook her head slowly. Griselda's blurred vision could not quite distinguish the expression in her eyes. The pretty face was painted, the pouting mouth a vivid gash of red - that much she could tell.

"I sure did my share towards putting her there!" said Eileen expressionlessly. "There's my car," she added in a tone of relief. "G'bye, Mrs. Kerrigan! Say 'hello' to ol' Walter for me! He sure thought I was awful!"

Deftly she manoeuvred the baby carriage off the steep curb, the motorman helped her lift it aboard, the red mouth smiled at him. The street-car clanged away. Griselda watched it out of sight - it soon became a moving blur among the others.

In spite of her own anxieties, the discouraging diagnosis of the doctor, she felt cheered. A weight had been lifted by her encounter with Eileen, or at least shifted and eased. For at last, the pattern of defeat that had so long puzzled her, the pattern laid down somewhere, sometime in the past, for the Prices, had been broken. The old, discouraging pattern to which they had all, as long as she had known them, conformed. Failures, taking failure for

granted, following the line of least resistance.

All but Eileen. Manners she had not, never would have. Walter would love that "Say 'hello' to ol' Walter from me"! But Eileen was no failure. She knew that Griselda had not seen her -- she had been under no obligation to stop and speak, and admit -- what she had admitted.

Eileen had made her come-back.

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The coffee was good. Priddle could make good coffee, thought Griselda. She filled up her cup again, and so far as she knew, not a drop was spilled.

"That'll show that old Priddle I can take care of myself!" said Griselda aloud.

She sat down in the warm kitchen, facing the window that was a blur of light against the blurred darkness, and attempted once more to fix her mind upon the funeral that was at that minute going on.

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The little wooden church at Bell Creek was crowded. George Evans, who had never during his lifetime received the respect of his neighbors either for himself or for his achievements, was getting it now in full measure, if their presence now at his funeral could be construed as respect. His widow accepted it as such and the thought

brought a measure of comfort as the service proceeded.

WE BROUGHT NOTHING INTO THIS WORLD AND IT IS CERTAIN THAT WE CAN CARRY NOTHING OUT....

"Nothing!" thought Ches Meade, fidgeting on the hard seat. "Nothing!.... This mighta been me....!"

"--EVEN AS A SLEEP AND FADE AWAY SUDDENLY LIKE THE GRASS..."

"Grass!" reflected Engvald Nordstaad. "Pasture's going down badly... Maybe I try brome grass next spring..."

His wife stole a glance at his granite profile and her kindly blue eyes passed with compassion to the bowed, shabby shoulders of Mrs. Evans.

"Poor thing!" she thought. "That shiftless man -- no loss he is... yet he was her man..."

Again she looked sideways at her husband: a pillar of strength to her and to his family.

"--FOR WE CONSUME AWAY IN THY DISPLEASURE..."

"There's no telling where the blow will fall," thought Maude Horner. "It might have been Albert, or Jim..."

The service was over. The coffin was borne down the aisle, placed near the door, and those of George Evans' neighbors who so desired filed past for a last look at him.

"Wasn't he -- I mean -- it <u>fell</u> on him...?" whispered a little grey mouse of a woman to her neighbor who had been in the latter procession.

"No. He looks all right...course you can't really tell. Those undertakers..."

Furtive glances were stolen at the discreet men in black standing inconspicuously in the background.

"I don't see how anybody could take a job like that!"

"They say it pays well."

"Probably the only job that has paid well in the last few years!"

Smiles at the grisly jest were hastily smothered.

Two and two down the steps came the pall-bearers...

"It's a real nice coffin."

"Doris said if it was the last thing she did, she'd give him a good funeral."

"...poor kiddies..."

"Me, I'm going to be cremated. Less trouble!"

The hearse slid away, black, glossy, gleaming, and behind it the cars fell into line, some battered and aged, all dusty, none new.

The tangled, yellow-brown grass in the graveyard was dry and rustly underfoot: all around the fence the side of the coulee was grazed down and almost bare. A line or two of the service passed through Albert Horner's mind as he stood hatless near the open grave.

"...GRASS...IN THE MORNING IT IS GREEN...IN THE EVENING IT IS CUT DOWN, DRIED AND WITHERED..."

"Grass.." he thought. "Of course we go back to grass... Stan and Roddy'll be in that rank, weedy stuff at Messines now... stinking mud... This is clean.... Germans -- what are they doing there now? Hitler..."

Old Mrs. Patchenko, standing near the grave of her daughter -in-law, shivered a little although the day was warm. She drew the black kerchief more closely around her face and glanced at her grandchildren, Ruth 'n Rose, who stood solemn-eyed, hand-in-hand before her. They were dearer to her than all the world now: they were her very own, for she had raised them single-handed, after Annie left to go to school. They did not, of course, remember the mother who had died giving birth to Ruth, whose body lay under the nearby mound... Mrs. Patchenko shivered again, and an uneasiness possessed her. Superstitiously the old woman sought to account for it.

"Is bad!" she thought. "A death by accident like that one.. More there will be perhaps....more graves here soon..."

Her fine arched brows puckered as she envisioned the possibility of accidents on the railway -- the hand-car--

A stir broke the tense silence, a sound of sobbing.

"EARTH TO EARTH...ASHES TO ASHES...DUST TO DUST..."

"Look!" whispered Ruth to her sister. "Chickadee!"

Rose barely turned her head. "Sparrow."

"No!"

"Yes!"

A warning tap on the shoulder bade the little girls desist, and they sobered instantly, turning two little sunburned faces, exactly alike, two pairs of sparkling eyes, clear light blue and melancholy hazel, under identical pale-brown fringes, towards the grave and the flowers.

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The cars drove homeward.

"I never thought there'd be such a turnout!"

"Poor Doris!"

"Ches seemed awful fidgety. I wonder..."

"Dust to dust... Less dust off that quarter of George Evans' in future, I bet...!"

.....

"It was a lovely funeral," said Mrs. Priddle, entering the kitchen. "I do wish you could 'ave seen it!"

"Don't be a ghoul, woman!" retorted Griselda. "And it's time you were busy with the supper. When I can see again, things'll be different!"

WHAT HAS BEEN AND WHAT IS

Life at Rolling Slopes went on as though George Evans had never been. A few days after the funeral, Ches Meade was at the store, idling his time away as usual, boastful and malicious. He was crowing over the success of his latest joke: directed this time against Walter Kerrigan.

Several days previously, Ches had won an elaborate box of candy playing the punch-board in the store. It was the coveted prize and several of the younger men had been playing the punch-board hoping to win a gift that any of the local girls would have appreciated. Ches however got it with an expenditure of twenty-five cents, and took it away with him, his light eyes gleaming craftily.

Shortly afterwards, the box of candy arrived for Mrs. Priddle, bearing a sentimental message purporting to be from Walter. Walter himself carried the parcel over to the house, and Mrs. Priddle opened it immediately. The authorship of the joke was immediately detected, and neither Mrs.Priddle nor Walter was particularly disconcerted. Griselda alone was thoroughly annoyed. Her exasperation against her blindness was constantly channelled into a resentment of Mrs. Priddle, and for anyone, even the utterly worthless Ches, to link the housekeeper's name with Walter's, was an unbearable impertinence.

She was not at all amused, and eventually she said to Walter, something that made him think she was taking the idea of mutual liking between Mrs. Priddle and himself seriously. He was horrified.

"Good God -- she has a face like a Pekinese pup! Why on earth would Ches ever think of it otherwise?"

Griselda's good humor was temporarily restored, and for a time she was almost polite to Mrs. Priddle, treating her with the condescending good nature that a handsome woman will often manifest towards a plain one whom she dislikes.

During the winter she had the little stroke, that, although it did not seriously disable her, impaired her

memory. Henceforth she lived largely in the past, and her recollections of the last few years were oddly confused. It was doubtful whether she could stand the shock of her second operation, and it was delayed. Fortunately, she took her blindness for granted, and very rarely recalled that she was to have had another operation. She became more capricious than ever and frequently and embarrassingly spoke her mind.

To the people she had known for so long, she was more important than she had been for some years. When she deliberately turned her back on the district, many of its inhabitants had sighed with relief. She had abdicated, she had not been forced out by any acts of theirs, although the will had been there. Some had wondered how long her voluntary retirement would last, and now they at last realized clearly that she would never again appear among them. They began to regret her withdrawal, knowing that it was but the prelude to death, and that her death would leave a gap in the group of people who had first settled in Rolling Slopes.

With Jasper Kerrigan it had been different. He had accommodated himself to others in the amenities of every-day living: he had not trampled on the toes of their prejudices. He had compromised, he had reconciled, and his

mark on others outside his own family was slight.

Griselda was different. The stubbornness that had irked others in their encounters with her in the past, seemed in retrospect an admirable firmness. She had been always the same, upright, unyielding, dependable, a landmark of respectability, the prop of the weak who had appealed to her for aid. To her they owed much and they were now willing to admit the debt. That which in its own time had been coarsely stigmatized as "leading the district around by the nose", became with a perspective of twenty years, a wise leadership. People who had suffered and slaved through a depression of seven years, passing in that brief time under the acceleration of want and worry, from the arrogance of their prime to the sobriety of an apprehensive middle life, could appreciate the old age of a woman who had lived through all that they had endured, and more. The poorest among them could say, and mean it sincerely,

"At least I've got my health to be thankful for...and my sight!"

Griselda was not an object of unmixed pity. It was impossible to pity anyone who so stoutly resented the sentimental approach. She demanded a sensible conversation of her visitors: the onus upon them was considerable, for her failing memory put difficulties in the way. She was

extremely likely to be talking of a time ten or twenty years back when her visitor was discussing the immediate present.

"...And what do you think of our Premier's latest?"

"The man's too good-looking to be very sensible!" said Griselda with emphasis: not till ten minutes later did her visitor deduce that Sir Robert Borden and not Mr. Mackenzie King or Mr. Aberhart might have been the Premier her hostess was thinking of....

So matters stood in the spring of 1937.

.....

Griselda was rocking on her front porch. With each forward tilt of her chair the loose board in the floor uttered a lugubrious squeak, but she did not hear it. The knitting needles in her stiff fingers clicked a nervous obligato to the slower rhythm of the rocking, and from the open door behind her, the sounds of housecleaning issued sporadically. Griselda sat as straight as the rocker permitted: she had aged and shrunken since her illness, but there was still an air of purpose about her erect, dark-clad figure. A ray of April sunshine, filtered and subdued by its passage through the stems of the leafless creepers, fell across her ivory face, the silvery whiteness of her hair.

Recollecting something, she turned to the door and called vigorously,

"Priddle!"

There was no response: if there had been, she could not have heard it. She called again, raising her still strong voice authoritatively,

"Priddle!"

Mrs. Priddle scurried out,

"'Ere now! Don't you go gettin' all excited!"

Griselda swung around, as if trying to bring her dim eyes to bear upon the ample figure of the housekeeper.

"I'll thank you to answer when I call, Priddle!"

Mrs. Priddle sighed and connected the tiny plug of the earphones to the battery. Mrs. Kerrigan snorted indignantly.

"Now, what did you want?" demanded Mrs. Priddle.

"I-I-..." But she had forgotten. Attack was the surest refuge. "What are you doing, Priddle?"

"House-cleaning!"

"Be sure you clean out the linen-closet properly--properly now, Priddle! And bring me out the best pillow-slips and the lace-edged runners -- <u>all</u> of them -- And put fresh paper on the shelves -- not newspapers, now, mind, Priddle!"

Mrs. Priddle stood patiently by.

"Be off, now!" concluded the old lady briskly. "Don't stand there like a gowk, woman! You won't last long

here if you don't bestir yourself!"

Mrs. Priddle dived back into the house, closing the screen door with pardonable violence. Griselda started at the slam.

"That old Priddle!"

She jerked out her earphone plug and retreated into silence. Her needles clicked once more: her mind wandered back and back.

"Walter," she thought. "Ought to have married! Who's to see to his things when I'm gone? Priddle -- bother the woman -- I suppose she does her best -- I'm not sure she isn't setting her cap at Walter! If I could see better, I could manage! ...Annie...I never see Annie any more now she's a nurse...Mabel Prescott... No more brains than God give a goose when she was a girl but she's turned out well... Jasper liked her."

She started as Mrs. Priddle laid a pile of linen on her lap and plugged in the hearing aid, a liberty which Griselda always resented.

"'Ere you are! I'll put the other chair beside you to put 'em on. Feel!"

Griselda jerked her hand away.

"Why on earth did you bring all this stuff out here...?"

But Mrs. Priddle had gone. Her charge muttered indignantly to herself and then began feeling through the linens, identifying each piece by the pattern of the lace: a recent accomplishment which had delighted her.

Walter stepped on the porch and Griselda started.

"You're busy, Mother."

"Someone has to look after things," replied Griselda ominously. "That Priddle!"

Walter laughed, patted her shoulder.

"Mrs. Priddle's all right, Mother. You know we couldn't get along without her, could we?"

The door snapped behind him and Griselda sat bolt upright in perturbation. Ches's jest had glanced lightly off those it was aimed at, but it rankled with Griselda. No matter how often she was reassured that Mrs. Priddle had no designs on Walter, she could not, since her illness, focus her thoughts and so arrange them to conquer her fears. When Walter emerged from the house, his mother spoke tremulously,

"Walter -- you -- those chocolates...?"

"Now, Mother," said the storekeeper gently, "Don't you get things all mixed up. Ches sent that box of candy to Mrs. Priddle and put my name on it for a joke. You remember Ches -- Ches Meade -- one of his jokes."

Griselda drew a sigh of relief.

"Of course! Just one of Ches's jokes -- time he outgrew them too! ...Now mind, Walter -- you're not to take Dan Meade in to town even if he asks you to..!"

Walter left her dwelling upon the vagaries of the Meade family twenty years before. She ran her hands through the pile on her lap, and was absorbed in happier memories immediately. The warm air lapped about her: there was no dust as yet, for the snow had lain late, and the season promised fairly...

Again it was spring, the welcome spring, after a winter of deep snow and bad war news. Again the land was green -- under grass to the north and west, grain to the south. There was no dust, no railroad, no dark, jutting elevators, stark against the sky. Again she saw the children: dark-eyed, merry, bouncing Emma, fussing over her trousseau, and shy, gangling Walter. Again Jasper ambled across the yard, lamenting his daily chore.

"Time to go get Mamie... Seems to me that gal could walk a mile or two each day an' wouldn't do her a particle of harm!"

"Now Jasper..!"

The buggy rattled gaily along the road, across the lease... The schoolhouse as it was then....

A long ray of dusty sunlight slanting obliquely

across the desks. A brown-covered Alexandra Reader -- a stray pencil in the aisle... A bluebottle humming in the window...

Her stern face relaxed, and Griselda slipped into slumber. Her veined hands rested on the pile of linens and Mrs. Priddle coming to collect them, shook her head.

"Well, I never! Now why couldn't she 'ave done it sooner an' left me to clean the 'ouse in peace?"

A SPREADER OF GOOD TIDINGS

She was still asleep when the Spreader of Good Tidings arrived. The Spreader was a 'missionary' worker of one of those mushroom sects that continually spring up, gain a meagre foothold, and wither away again. For several days she had circulated in the district on this visit: she had made a previous round during the fall, so that she was not entirely unknown at Rolling Slopes. Most people tolerated her, laughed at her emotion and the extravagances of her 'sermons', but treated her on the whole with courtesy.

She arrived at the store in good spirits, encouraged by her reception at the sectionman's sprawling home and convinced that much of the seed she scattered in

this locality would bear fruit. Old Mrs. Patchenko, with her austere face and severe dark clothing, the wide, wondering, limpid gaze of Ruth 'n Rose during her lengthy exhortation, their reverently-bowed heads during her prayer, had all heartened the Spreader's faith in her work.

She scrambled out of her buggy in front of the store, a myopic-eyed, tired-looking creature of uncertain age with a perpetual uneasy smile. The men lounging on the step waiting for the morning train, shifted uncomfortably when they recognized her. There was a shuffle towards retreat: only Ches Meade remained on the step, surveying the Spreader of Good Tidings with malicious contempt and the dawn of a grin on his craggy face. Then he too moved toward the door of the store, open today to let in more light as Joe and Walter took stock.

"Lady to see you, Walter!" he shouted.

"Brothers!" said the Spreader of Good Tidings, addressing Ches and the open door. "Brothers! I want to have a little talk with you...!" She paused for this to sink in, and taking another step towards the dark interior of the store, continued, fixing her eyes intensely upon Ches,

"I want to pass on to you tidings of joy and

comfort and truth!" She had reached the threshold, stood peering in through her heavy spectacles. "You want to listen, don't you, Brothers?" Previous experience had evidently convinced the Spreader that this question should be purely rhetorical, for she did not pause for a reply.

"Let me tell you what peace, what happiness there is in being one of our little happy band! Come, join our little group -- small as yet, but great to come and more valuable than thousands in the eye of the Lord. Let me pray for you...!"

Abruptly she stopped: her eyes had become accustomed to the dark interior of the building, and she became conscious that she was addressing Ches alone. Ches too was disconcerted by the discovery. He had missed the movement of the trap door in the floor at the back as they entered. He glanced around with consternation, and then hurried to the back door.

"They must of went out the back..."

But the only person in sight was old Mrs. Kerrigan on the verandah.

"There you are!" said Ches in relief. "You go an' save her -- she--uh--she'll be glad to see you. Was just sayin' she wished you'd come around!"

He slipped back into the store and latched the door after him. The Spreader of Good Tidings, confused by

the disappearance of her audience, walked up the verandah steps, and with a timid glance at the sleeping Griselda, rapped on the door. Mrs. Priddle appeared like a Jack-in-the-box: the surprise was mutual.

"Yer wastin' yer time 'ere!" said Mrs. Priddle when informed of the visitor's message. "The old lady is stone deaf an' that difficult, an' Mr. Kerrigan is a busy man, an' I got this 'ouse to clean before she begins askin' me 'ow many weeks it's goin' to take! You better not stay!"

"Sister," said the evangelist patiently, in her rather nasal tones. "The voice of the Lord speaks above all others! The moment of salvation is here and now..."

"'Tain't my 'ome," returned the housekeeper doggedly. "You'll 'ave to ask 'er."

The evangelist took an uncertain step away from the door, but before she started to leave, Griselda awoke. She sat bolt upright and turned her head from side to side as if to deny she had been guilty of leaning back in the chair. Then she fumbled for her knitting,

"Priddle!"

The housekeeper linked the dangling cords of earphone and battery.

"Yes?"

"Give me my knitting -- what's all this?"

"The linen -- I'll put it back on the shelves..."

The Spreader of Good Tidings joined the conversation.

"Good morning, dear sister in the faith!"

Griselda sat with a gathering frown on her brow, but undeterred the evangelist went on,

"How wonderful it is that you have heard the voice of the Lord and wish to testify of your good tidings..."

"Who are you?" demanded Griselda,"and what on earth are you talking about? Priddle, where did this woman come from?"

"She just come..."

"I am the Helper of the Lord," announced the Spreader, "His Spreader of Good Tidings! Sister, are you prepared for the end? Let us pray!"

But Griselda had got her bearings. Her own religion, strict and Calvinistic, had mellowed and broadened throughout her life: five years earlier she would have listened to the Spreader patiently. But her illness had severed the tight-drawn cords of memory, and she had in some measure reverted to the severe Scottish tenets of her early training. She rose to her feet, seeming for an instant to tower over the colorless figure of the other.

"I don't want to pray with you!" she said grimly. "I do my praying in church and by myself! I know who you are -- one of those crazy evangelists going around the

country getting people all worked up over their souls when they ought to be keeping the Ten Commandments an' doing their daily work! You ought to be doing something useful -- raising a family, or earning your keep at honest work! Who sent you here?"

The Spreader was incapable of reply, but Mrs. Priddle piped up, anxious to end the scene and settle her patient in tranquility once more.

"I seen 'er come out the back of the store with Ches Meade."

"Humph! Mighta known it!" Griselda nodded significantly. "That boy an' his tricks -- he'll come to no good. The less you have to do with Ches Meade, my girl, the better it will be for you -- 'tain't fitting for a woman to be running loose around the country making such a spectacle of herself and peddling sentimental prayers around the community!"

She shook her knotted finger in the general direction of the Spreader.

"Take my word for it -- you'll regret the day you ever took up with Ches Meade!"

She sat down abruptly, and spoke again in tones that were suddenly thin and tired and old.

"I guess maybe Ches could use a prayer or two,

no matter who says 'em! I'm sorry I spoke so just now -- but I've done my own praying all my life, and I figure to keep right on. I don't intend to die yet!"

"God bless you, sister, and bring you to a better frame of mind!" said the evangelist sadly, as she started down the steps.

"Priddle!" said Griselda sharply, "Don't just stand there! Give that woman a cup of coffee and something to eat before she goes!"

After a moment of indecision the Spreader of Good Tidings followed Mrs. Priddle meekly into the kitchen.

Fifteen minutes later she emerged, and skirted with an apprehensive look, the severe figure of Griselda, still rocking on the verandah. The Spreader entered the store by the back way and found there, to her pleasure, an augmented group ready to address. They had brought down cases of eggs or cans of cream to ship on the train whose shrill whistle came faintly from the direction of Bell Creek at this moment: they were waiting for the mail to be sorted and to make their purchases.

The evangelist's face lit up when she saw Mrs. Horner and Mrs. Evans in the company, for she had been received with courtesy by these women on the preceding day.

"Good morning, dear sisters!" she said advancing.

"It is good to see your faces and to know that you will be with us in body as well as in spirit!"

She glanced with satisfaction around the circle of listeners. There were two women, Mrs. Horner and Mrs. Evans; There were also Ches Meade, beaky and watchful, Joe Griggs with his sad little monkey face, Walter Kerrigan, pleasant and nondescript, and young Jim Horner and Tony Wilkie. The Evans children and Ethel Horner watched with curious interest, the group of adults looked embarrassed and nervous.

"Brothers", said the Spreader mildly, gathering her listeners in with a comprehensive glance. "Brothers and sisters! And you too, little children in the faith!"

Fifteen-year old Ethel Horner flushed scarlet at the insult of being included in the latter group: her brother grinned faintly. The Spreader continued, her tone gathering intensity:

"I want you to listen for a minute -- just a minute -- to tidings of good. I want to pray with you and for you, and for all poor sinners of this community and of this country, and of this world, who have not yet repented and shunned the broad way that leadeth to destruction! Let us pray! Let us first pray that your hard hearts may be opened, that you may be inspired to shun all luxury and

worldliness! Prayer will restore your spiritual health! Prayer will heal your sorrows -- yes, yours, dear sister in adversity, and yours, poor fatherless children!"

Her voice was high and sustained in pitch: her gaze travelled with strange fixed intensity from face to face. The tension that had steadily mounted in the group broke as the little Evans girl burst into loud sobs. Her mother attempted to hush her, but her own nerves were at breaking point. Her weary lined face twitched, she bit her lips as the evangelist resumed her exhortation.

"Let us pray! Prayer will bring what your hearts most crave -- healing for your wounds, spiritual health, salvation. Salvation is open to you all -- I want every one of you -- every one -- you, and you, and you, poor child, who feel already the urge to be saved. I want each and every one -- you brother, and you -- every man of you, every ---"

"Listen, sister!" said Ches harshly. "You want every man of us -- yeah -- we can all see that! There's better ways of gettin' yourself a man than prayin'!"

A moment's shocked silence was broken by a murmur of reproach.

"For shame!"

"Ches! Don't!"

The evangelist flushed crimson, a deep wave of color that crept over her sallow face and ebbed. She strove to speak -- the words quivered on her lips and could not make themselves heard. Her audience had shrunk back from Ches in disgust, and now he stood the closest to her, sneering and arrogant with pale blue, darting eyes.

Suddenly she straightened, drawing back her narrow shoulders.

"The Lord forgive you, friend!" said the Spreader, and the words rang with strange force in the silence, for even the sobbing child was still. "The Lord forgive you -- as --as I do!" Her voice faltered and broke, her sallow face contorted pitifully, and she wept openly.

Ches, taken aback, would have retired quietly from the scene. But Doris Evans, handkerchief in hand, stepped forward.

"How dare you?" she cried passionately, "How dare you -- you, speak so, Ches Meade? You led my man astray -- you and your rotten hounds, and your rotten hunting! You took him away from his home and his work! Maybe you killed him -- how do I know? Maybe it was one of your rotten jokes that made the tractor overturn! Maybe he'd be alive today if it wasn't for you!"

Ches shrank as the accusation rang out. His face whitened and his eyes widened in horror.

"No!" he said, in a half-whisper. "No! I told him to stay to the middle of the road an' to hell with the steers and he laughed an' pulled over onto the shoulder -- I told him...!"

Still no one spoke. The evangelist was getting into her buggy: it rattled away to the south. Ches went out, closing the door quietly. He mounted his horse, Dusty with the long, wise face, who had been in his too brief prime a good animal, and jogged slowly up the road and over the track.

A MYSTERY OF THE PRAIRIE

The late, heavy snowfall had melted, bringing much-needed moisture to the ever-thirsty land. Beside the grade, the deep ditches were full of muddy, brownish water, and along the track a long pool extended nearly to the sectionman's house. On the verge of the shallow water, Ruth 'n Rose splashed and played. Side by side, red sweater and blue, they bobbed and dipped, and poured the cloudy slough-water from an old dipper into a lardpail, peering intently into it as they did so.

A puff of wind shivered the glassy surface of the water, a long-legged bird sidled and bobbed. A meadow-lark warbled on a post by the roadside and Ruth 'n Rose

looked delightedly at each other.

"Meadowlark!"

"Put him in our book!"

And they bent to their dredging once more, intent upon finding the first tadpoles of the season.

Ches rode by, receiving but a passing glance from the little girls. They were, with one exception, the last to see him alive.

Half-an-hour later the Horner's battered old car crossed the wooden bridge over the big coulee. Ches's horse was tied to the fence, near the spot where George Evans had met his death, and Ches himself, lay just within the lease, his red windbreaker making a vivid splash of color against the brown grass and the sodden willow leaves. The naked willow twigs with their little buds plumping out in the warm air tossed above his craggy high-boned face, turned up to the blue sky. His pale-blue sightless eyes had a look of intense amazement, and just within the circle of willow bushes a lean hound, whimpering in a trap, indicated the reason why Ches had dared to trespass upon the domain of the crazed hermit of the lease. Old Bill's bullet had killed him instantly.

Old Bill was without difficulty apprehended by a policeman from Maverick. Battered, shrunken and furtive, he was taken away, the shrivelled little claw-like hands

that had not for forty years been out of reach of his old Mauser, handcuffed together. All he was heard to say was

"He come back... I seen him...comin' back...!"

The official search of Old Bill's unsavory shack revealed his store of bullets, his snowshoes and moccasins, his traps, his unspeakable mattress and blankets, and the source of his monthly money-order. The latter was a lump sum which had been deposited in an eastern bank in Old Bill's name over forty years previously, and as he had been drawing on it at the rate of fifteen dollars a month since then, it was nearly exhausted.

One more discovery was made which gave weight to the legends that were growing up about the hermit. A twenty-dollar gold piece was found, wedged in a crack in the floor of the shack under the encrustation of years. For some weeks, the popular pastime for the youth of Rolling Slopes, and some of their elders, was a treasure hunt at Old Bill's shack. The shack itself was dismantled, the earth around and under it, spaded up, but without results.

Old Bill himself was adjudged insane and committed to the asylum.

The news was startling enough to keep its hold upon Griselda's failing memory. Mrs. Priddle was the first to burst in with it.

"What do you think now?" she gasped. "Ches Meade's been shot -- Old Bill shot him up there at the bridge...!"

"Something like that was bound to happen to Ches," said Griselda calmly. "Likely he isn't the first one that Old Bill's shot, either. He's carried that gun around for forty years -- bound to use it some time or other!"

She disconnected her hearing aid as a sign that the interview was over, and sat musing. Ches Meade was dead. She had been a woman in her thirties when Ches Meade's aimless life began. He might have been expected to outlive her that long. Yet he was dead. The lank, slouching form would lie in the graveyard on the hillside before she would. The light, prying eyes were closed for ever, the malicious tongue that had been instrumental in driving Miss Freddie and Betty Allen from Rolling Slopes, was silenced. And that which had animated the whole had passed like a wisp of smoke in the wind, and who would regret it? Ches had ever played upon other people's weaknesses, dragging to light the things they would have kept hidden, exposing the little follies, the personal secrets. Scoffer, belittler -- his death lightened the atmosphere. The reasons for his being what he was would never be fully known: they were rooted too deeply in his obscure past, in his obscure soul...

Old Bill was a different matter. He had never been one of the community. Rather he was a part of the landscape, identified with his corner of the bare and rolling lease, with the deep, winding coulee and the weather-worn wooden bridge that led the road across the steam-bed there. He belonged to the dull-toned autumn grassland, the barren winter prairies, and when the dry and dusty years sucked life from the fields and range alike, Old Bill's stunted, slow-moving figure might have stood for a personification of Depression. His grizzled, unkempt hair, his scowling, clay-colored features under their thick coating of dust and grime, his furtive, yellow-brown eyes and padding walk were all long familiar at Rolling Slopes. Long familiar, long ignored. Those who knew him were so accustomed to him that they did not realize what an extraordinary figure he was: in fact it might be said that they had never <u>seen</u> him. He had come regularly under their glances of amusement, disdain, or exasperation, but there had been little or no acceptance of him as a human being. He was an obstacle in the road, an impediment in the post-office wicket, the evil old watchdog of the lease, an animated clod of the coulee-bottom, but not a fellow being. And then, suddenly without warning, he was Death, who had lived among them all those years...

For all these years, mused Griselda, they lived almost side by side, Ches and Old Bill. All these years -- ever since Ches came to Rolling Slopes. And suddenly one of 'em murders the other, and probably no one'll ever know why. A mystery... Goodness knows there's enough of mysteries in the bush and the mountains, and on the sea: it stands to reason the prairie has its mysteries too. Only you never expect the people you've known for years to turn out part of a mystery...

.....

One day when the excitement of Ches Meade's murder was several months in the past and the treasure hunters around Old Bill's lair in the willows had almost given up hope, a couple of the younger lads were prowling about the scene of these happenings. They had started home across the pasture when the eye of one of them fell upon Vanloder's Well, sole remaining trace of one of the early ranches near Maverick. The old well had long been boarded over, and this year newer and longer grass grew at its edges than had grown there for some time. With the idle curiosity of boys, they strolled over and pried up a board to look down the long-disused shaft. The water level had sunk during the dry years: the glimmer of it could be seen about fifteen feet down, and sticking up out of the water were bits of rusty

iron. Instantly an idea sprang to life.

"If we could get it out...!" said Ted Horner.

"We better hurry," said his friend, the practical Harald Nordstaad. "That car of scrap iron is goin' to be moved out pretty soon -- been sittin' on the siding for months."

Farmers all over the prairies had been selling scrap metal for the past two years: each week, carloads of it went out to be shipped to Japan from the West Coast. But the demand had ceased: it was doubtful whether the small quantity on the sidings at Rolling Slopes would ever be collected. Nevertheless the boys were sanguine.

"A chain -- an' a hook..."

"Mebbe I c'n get a horse -- might be something big down there!"

They parted, to return the next day with an assortment of chains and hooks, a patient horse, a hastily-rigged windlass. They set to work.

Out of Vanloder's Well there came in succession an iron wheel, heavily rusted, a length of logging chain, an iron whiffletree, a bit of an old harrow, and a section of a hayrake, its wide-curved teeth all sprung and bent so that it caught on the rotted boards on the side of the well as it came up. The horse pulled valiantly, the improvised

windlass creaked and groaned, and suddenly with a rending of timber, the iron came out. Impaled on the rusted teeth of the hayrake was a certain amount of what had,a long time ago, been a man.

Vanloder's Well was cleaned out thoroughly, and the rest of the skeleton brought to light. The skull with a bullet-hole in it, was otherwise reasonably intact: in the lower jaw there still gleamed a gold tooth. Steve Acker had not left Rolling Slopes after all in 1908, and Old Bill's long-continued hostility towards prowlers was, in part, explained. The actual details of Steve Acker's violent end were never made clear, for the crazed hermit was as inarticulate upon the matter as the hills and slopes among which he had committed two slayings.

If his presence had given significance to the spot he had called his home, his departure with the Police had not diminished that significance. The treasure hunters, spurred on by the discovery of Steve Acker's body in the well, renewed their eager search for the hoard of twenty-dollar gold pieces they were convinced was somewhere to be found. The fences of the north-east corner of the lease suffered in consequence, and finally Harry Wise in exasperation set fire to the willow glade, the swamp-grass, and the remains of Old Bill's shack. The following spring brought

up the new grass on the blackened coulee, the willows sprang up bushy from their roots, and melted snow lay in the hollow of the swamp. Old Bill might never have lived his forty years of violence and squalor in the peaceful spot.

Vanloder's Well was filled in by Jim Horner, who was pasturing stock in the coulee bottom east of the bridge. For it seemed by the fall of 1938 that the depression was indeed over. There had been a fair crop, there was a fair market, and people looked optimistically into the future once more.

LULL

By August of 1939, it seemed certain that the good years had come again. Harvest at Rolling Slopes was in full swing, and the crop was fair. In the fields along the high-graded road that ran north and south past Kerrigan's store, two combines, Burton's and Wilkie's, made steady rounds. Since the depression that had brought in the use of the combine, and of the header to catch what grain could be garnered from six or eight-inch stalks in the parched fields, harvesting was a simplified matter. Three men constituted the crew: two for the combine itself, one for the truck. Little threshing was done now in the district.

Albert Horner's shabby old truck turned up the short road leading to the elevators. The smell of autumn,

of grain dust and drying vegetation spiced the air about these angular towers, and their shadows lay black for yards along the dusty ground, across the tawny weeds.

Ethel Horner scrambed out of the cab of the truck, shook out her skirt and smoothed a wrinkle.

"Why didn't you tell me to let you out at the corner?" demanded her father. "Been shorter to walk."

"I forgot," said Ethel vaguely. "It's nice -- I don't mind a little walk. I'll be at the corner before you get the load dumped!"

She waved to the elevator man, and started to walk back to the corner, humming a tune that was always played now at the dances.

"When I grow too old to dream,
I'll have you to remember...
When I grow too old to dream..."

But the high notes of the air were too high for her contralto voice: she started again on the alto, proud of her ability to do so. Victoria Hampton-Reid had taught the little girls to sing in parts at Sunday School, six or seven years before. Ethel was proficient at taking the alto now, with Edythe Hampton-Reid or Solveig Nordstaad as the soprano. The tune ran on and on in her mind as she walked down the dusty road.

Ruth 'n Rose Patchenko, rearranging the domestic life of an ant colony with a stick, giggled when she spoke to them, and did not reply. But after she had passed there was a murmur, an answering murmur, and a merry burst of laughter.

"Silly little kids!" said Ethel aloud. Evidently Ruth 'n Rose were not impressed by her new dignity. For Ethel was seventeen, and very conscious of the fact. It was the only age to be.

She pulled off the tight red tam she had worn to keep the dust out of her hair, and shook out the loose, thick waves. It was pretty hair, and Ethel herself, a taller, younger edition of her mother, was a pretty girl. Her face was rosy and a little freckled: her eyes round and dark and very bright. With her trim figure, light step, and birdlike turn of the head, she was rather like a robin.

She flicked a speck of dust from her black skirt and looked straight ahead of her at a point about ten feet in front of her shoes. Thus she was able to glance up with the charming tilt of her head and neck as a truck drew to a standstill beside her.

Eric Nordstaad, like his father, never wasted words,

"Where are you going?" he demanded from the cab window.

"To see Mrs. Kerrigan."

"How long are you staying?"

"Not long -- an hour or so."

"Want a lift home?" said Eric, ignoring as he was intended to the fact that Albert Horner, with at least three more loads to haul, could quite well drive his daughter home. Ethel hesitated as though debating an entirely new idea.

"Why, yes!" she said, "I would like a ride."

"Two loads from now..." He paused to calculate. "Be 'bout an hour an' a quarter?"

Ethel nodded. She made no effort to leave, and Eric did not indicate that he was in a hurry to move. Not until the roar of Horner's truck leaving the elevator was heard did he start his engine.

"Goin' to the dance?" he shouted.

"Yes."

He nodded, waved, and the truck slid away. A moment later Albert Horner passed his daughter without picking her up. He turned the corner and drove on, reflecting that it might be a waste of money to send Ethel to High School and Normal. The notion passed.

"The only one of the kids I've been able to do anything for," he mused. "Won't hurt her to have a bit of

education, even if she marries Eric."

The idea -- not a new one -- that the two families might come to be linked by marriage rather appealed to him. Eric at twenty was a good farmer, a good manager, a thoroughly decent lad. His wife would have things easier than her mother had.

"Especially if this depression breaks," he thought. "A run of good years might see us out of the hollow, even if we don't have a war some time in the next ten years... This 'itler talks too big for 'is boots... The boys'd have to go..."

.....

Ethel had almost reached the store. She was quite reconciled to the visit now and loitered dreamily along, lost in her own vague thoughts.

"People always want what they haven't got," she decided sagely. "Jim wants me to go to school because he couldn't. He likes fair hair because we're all dark... He likes Edythe's hair better'n he does Solveig's -- that'd make Sol mad if she knew! ...Eric..."

Burton's truck passed her with a prolonged toot and she looked indignantly after it.

"That Tom! Showing off...!"

This visit to Mrs. Kerrigan had not been Ethel's

own idea. Her mother had insisted upon it that morning.

"You can go down with Dad in the truck," she said briskly, "and come back before supper!"

"But, Mother...!"

"Now no nonsense! She's asked about you two or three times and I promised you'd go over before school started. A visit means a lot to her. If I was as old as Mrs. Kerrigan, you'd like to think someone cared enough to call on me, wouldn't you?"

"All right, Mother." Ethel paused. I can see the road from the front room, she thought. When I see Eric go down with a load, I'll start to walk...

"I'll get ready," she said agreeably. "What shall I talk about? She's so forgetful."

"Just anything," replied her mother. "Doesn't matter. Tell her about your plans for next year and what you do at school, and talk about Annie Patchenko. She always asks about Annie."

"She called me Annie when I was there when she was sick last month."

Maude shook her head. "I know..." I can't believe it, she thought. She was always so good to me, and so energetic and always took such an interest in everything and everybody... And now they say she won't live more than a year...

I can't believe it....

No such serious thought was in Ethel's mind as she drifted in leisurely fashion into the store, and greeted Walter, with whom she was a favorite. His face lighted up when she told him she had come to visit his mother.

"Now you run on over!" he said heartily. "She'll be pleased to see you, Ethel -- you're a real favorite with Mother, and it's kind of you to visit her like this."

Ethel thought so too: it was gratifying to have her kindness acknowledged, if only by Walter, who did not really count. Her own family had an exasperating way of treating her as if she were still a little girl.

She crossed the little yard, no longer as tidy as in past years, when Mrs. Kerrigan was active enough to rake the scanty grass and burn the dead curled leaves that now were falling from the jagged hedge.

Mrs. Priddle's face cleared when she saw Ethel.

"Well, come in, child! I'm <u>that</u> glad to see you. She's that difficult today, an' a visitor is just what she needs to take her mind off me. I dunno what worries her so!"

Ethel choked back a giggle. The old stale jest of the box of chocolates that Ches Meade had perpetrated before his untimely end, had outlived him. The community

still smiled at Griselda's recurrent suspicion that Mrs. Priddle was setting her cap for Walter.

"...that difficult!" lamented Mrs. Priddle. She paused significantly before opening the inner door.

"You won't excite 'er, now, Ethel?" she pleaded. "The things I puts up with from 'er! Twenty years I been a practical nurse off an' on, an' no one ever talked to me like she do!"

She opened the door, scuttled ant-like across the carpet towards her charge with a small shriek of horror.

"Dear! Dear! What a mess we're in! Just look at your knitting! An' your sweater all buttoned up crooked too! People 'd think I never took care of you!"

"Keep your hands to yourself, Priddle!"

Griselda's voice was unexpectedly vigorous. She pushed aside Mrs. Priddle's efforts to arrange her costume and sat, perfectly erect, with her grey-stockinged legs and slippered feet half-covered with a woollen afghan in spite of the warmth of the day.

She did not respond to Ethel's greeting, and the housekeeper hastily linked her hearing apparatus with its battery.

"See!" she cried shrilly. "You've got company. Don't you wish you'd let me tidy you up a bit?"

"Don't shout, Priddle!" said Griselda calmly. "You do get so excited! Who is it? Oh, it's you, Ethel? Come over here, child."

The imperious tone was softer, the almost sightless eyes looked to one side of the girl and past her.

"Sit here," said Mrs. Priddle officiously. "Right here. I'll get some tea, shall I?"

"You might just as well make yourself useful, Priddle," replied Griselda drily.

The housekeeper scuttled away.

"That old Priddle!" said Griselda vindictively. "I declare she's more trouble than she's worth. I intend to fire her when I'm better! I never did like housekeepers!"

She sat gazing disapprovingly into space.

"How are you feeling?" ventured Ethel.

"I get tired," said her hostess. "If only I could see what I'm doing -- this knitting --"

She fumbled beside her and held up a grey square of ragged knitting, uneven with dropped stitches along the edge.

"What -- what is it going to be?"

Mrs. Kerrigan tossed it aside disdainfully. "Oh -- Priddle tells me that all the women in the Club are doing them -- they make them into quilts or something for

the Salvation Army. I do get tired of it, but the things will be finished soon. How's your grandmother, Annie?"

"It's Ethel, Mrs. Kerrigan."

"Of course you are! I forgot... Your mother said you'd come. She said you'd seen Annie."

"Yes," said Ethel. "She has a new brown suit -- she looked nice. Oh -- you've got her graduation picture over there!"

"I never saw it." said the other. "She'll look fine in a nurse's uniform, Annie will. She's a good girl... I wish I had Annie here now instead of this silly old woman!"

She seemed to have forgotten her visitor, and sat rocking and humming.

"Annie said she might get holidays in October," volunteered Ethel. "She's coming back here for a week."

Mrs. Priddle bustled in with a tea-tray. She drew up a little table and picked up a couple of squares of knitting, each with the needles in it. She held them out with a resigned shrug, and turned to Griselda.

"Ready for your tea?"

"You've taken your time, Priddle," said the old woman coldly. "When I'm well again, things'll be different..! 'Twasn't this way when <u>you</u> lived here, Annie!"

"It's Ethel, Ethel Horner," snapped Mrs. Priddle.

"Of course.. I forgot!" She seemed to shrink when she was corrected, to become suddenly older and frailer. Ethel was almost angry with the injured housekeeper, but Mrs. Kerrigan recovered and spoke briskly.

"Where's your mother, child? Maude never comes near me any more."

"She was here yesterday," said Ethel. "She stayed all afternoon, Mrs. Kerrigan."

"Of course! I remember now." And indeed she seemed brighter for a moment.

"She says you're going away this fall, Ethel -- back to school?"

"Yes."

"Hm-m-m... Well, that's good -- girls should be able to take care of themselves... But don't stay at it too long, child. Girls should get married -- I was married when I was your age, Annie. How old are you now?"

"I'm Ethel... I'm seventeen."

"Well -- I declare! I thought you were Annie... So you're seventeen... That's too young! Girls have a lot of silly ideas at seventeen. I had a lot of silly ideas -- thought I wanted to get married. It's a good thing I didn't."

She paused, and went on as if thinking aloud.

"I cried when my wedding dress was lost, and my

chest that came from China..."

Ethel was interested. A wedding dress of fifty years ago -- a chest from China?

"How did it get lost -- your wedding dress?"

"The men dropped it into the water when they had to portage," said the old woman dreamily. "It was teakwood and too heavy to raise, so there it stayed at the bottom of the river. I think they dropped it on purpose -- they hated that chest because it was so heavy... A silly little river called the Wakaw. All those places in the north have ungodly names... All my linen and my wedding dress. They say teakwood lasts a hundred years buried in the mud -- my chest will outlast me!"

She laughed, and Mrs. Priddle took advantage of the pause to put the teacup into the veined hand.

"Be careful!" said Griselda sharply. "What was I saying, child -- I seem to forget so, these days."

"Your wedding dress," said Ethel, "I thought you met Mr. Kerrigan out west?"

"So I did -- he was clerk at the next trading post, and later on for my brother."

"But how did you know -- I mean, you had your dress made?"

"Goodness me, of course I did! I knew I'd get married -- girls always did in my day and they counted on it,

and got things ready. We didn't care who knew it either. I don't hold with girls nowadays -- scared to admit they'd like to get married. What d'ye suppose God made you for?"

She paused, exhausted by her own vehemence, and Mrs. Priddle shook her head.

"Excited," she whispered reproachfully, and aloud she said soothingly,

"There, there! Ethel's only seventeen yet and she's got plenty of boy friends, I hear. Maybe she won't get to be a teacher at all, eh, Ethel?"

Ethel fidgeted, crimson-faced. Before she could reply, Mrs. Kerrigan spoke again.

"Boy friends! Nonsense! I don't like that term! Either she's got a beau or she hasn't!"

Out came the plug of the earphones with a vicious little snick, and Mrs. Kerrigan retired into a difiant silence.

"Oh, dear'." said Mrs. Priddle aloud. "She do try my patience something shocking! I declare, if Mr Kerrigan wasn't such a pleasant-spoken man an' so considerate, I'd go -- I'd leave this very day!"

She seized one of the knitted squares and began to pull it down, jerking out the crinkled wool savagely.

"What are you doing?" gasped Ethel.

"Starting 'er off again," said Mrs. Priddle calmly

as she re-knitted a firm row and rolled up the loose wool. "She knits it up an' I ravels it out -- she forgets what she's been doin' an' it's so 'ard to keep 'er amused."

"Priddle!" said the old woman suddenly. "What are you doing?"

The housekeeper jumped guiltily.

"Just tidying up your knitting a bit," she shouted. "I thought for a moment she 'ad 'er phones on," she muttered to Ethel. "Somethimes you'd swear she could see an' 'ear!"

"Leave my knitting alone!" snapped her patient. "It never feels the same when you've been tampering with it. And I want some new wool. I hate this kinky stuff -- where does it all come from?"

She felt about on the table for a cookie and munched for a moment.

"Poor stuff!" she said emphatically. "Priddle, if you can't bake <u>good</u>, don't bake in my house -- that's all!"

Mrs. Priddle cast up her eyes to the ceiling and was silent. Ethel plugged in the hearing apparatus. Eric's truck had just gone for the second load. When it returned, she would leave.

"Tell me about the trip west," she said gently. "I didn't know you came by boat."

"Yes," replied the other. "I went to the trading

post Fort Tukikume -- it was north nearly to the Athabasca -- to keep house for my brother...I waited three months in Winnipeg for the ice to go out..."

"'Ave some more tea?"

Mrs. Kerrigan passed her cup. "Fill it up, do!" she said crossly, "I never seem to get much tea when you pour!"

"How long did your trip take?"

"I forget --- a long time. We went by York boat down the rivers -- eight men rowed, and going upstream they had to drag it up the swift water with ropes..."

"It must have been interesting," said Ethel. She eyed her hostess, white-haired, aged, peremptory, who had been a young girl, only nineteen, and had taken a long trip by York boat through the unknown wilds with the fur-traders nearly sixty years before...long before she, Ethel, was born, and before her father and mother were born... For a moment she was overwhelmed by the assurance that the past had all been real -- as real as the present... She felt small, and alone, and unimportant.

"...not sorry I left," Griselda was saying. "I like it here... It was too cold in the north... I was glad to leave and come out to Edmonton, and then to Calgary, and then here. The store. This country was new -- I've seen it grow up..."

She chuckled at some inner amusement, and added,

"I've had an interesting life, an' now I've got time to think about it, I'm surprised how interesting it was. I doubt that you young 'uns -- any of you -- 'll have as interesting a life as some of us old folks had. Things is too easy for you now!"

She leaned back, a little smile on her withered face, and disconnected the earphones.

Mrs. Priddle sighed with relief.

"There -- she's off! She'll sit like that till supper, an' I can do my work in peace an' quiet!"

"Is she asleep?" asked Ethel curiously.

The housekeeper shook her head. "I don't think so. She just dreams like, an' sometimes she says a word or two like she was answering a question -- creepy it is, to 'ear 'er."

"I'll go now," said Ethel. "Shall I say good-bye?"

But the housekeeper advised against breaking into the memories in which the old woman had submerged herself. Ethel bade Mrs. Priddle a decorous farewell, and ran back into the store for the few purchases her mother had requested. Then she started to walk home, slowly, for she was thinking. The visit had altered the current of her thoughts: she, Ethel Horner, who was seventeen and pretty, was not, somehow, as important as she had been, two hours before. Ethel Horner was no longer at the very centre of things: she was now at the end

of a long line of girls, who had all been seventeen once, but were now older or middle-aged, like her mother, or old, like Mrs. Kerrigan. And yet they had all been seventeen once... maybe all as pretty, with a boy waiting at the corner.

Nordstaad's truck that had been delayed at the elevator put on a spurt, turned the corner and caught up with her. Ethel climbed soberly into the cab.

As it was not a mail day, business at the store was slack. Half-an-hour after Ethel had gone, Tony Wilkie drove up in the truck and opened the cab door for Mabel. He was now seventeen, still slim and small for his age. His brown face was deeply tanned and he looked healthy. But his dark, haunted eyes were unhappy, for Tony was still unable to meet the requirements of life on his uncle's farm. He lived in dread of Dave Wilkie's ready wrath, his loud voice, his scolding tongue. Today, with the truck to handle, while Dave and Stephan Patchenko worked the combine, he was doubly nervous. He disliked the heavy truck, feeling it was always trying to get away from him, and had no confidence in his own ability to manage the hauling.

Mabel Wilkie entered the store and perched her son on the counter. The little boy, now nearly four, wriggled down and evaded her outstretched hand, as he ran back to the

door. But he was too late: Tony had gone with the truck. The child remained pouting in the doorway, a ridiculous miniature of Dave Wilkie, with the close set grey eyes and shock of fair hair.

Mabel ordered her groceries, then she too went out at the back to speak to Mrs. Kerrigan, hauling her reluctant son by one hand. Tony was just leaving the elevators.

Ahead of him down the road walked the youngest Patchenkos, hand in hand. Very nearly of an age, very nearly of a size, Ruth 'n Rose were never seen apart. Their brief print frocks, one blue, one pink, fluttered about their bare, scratched brown legs, and their bushy, light-brown hair blew in the wind.

Tony, who knew these two of old, having gone to school with Olga and Myron Patchenko, pulled up beside them.

"Want a ride?" said he, arguing quite rightly that a minute or two lost on this trip would make no difference as Dave knew that Mabel was going to the store and would not expect them back quite so soon.

Ruth 'n Rose gazed at him consideringly, light blue eyes and limpid hazel beneath identical shetland-pony fringes. Then they looked at each other. Riding in the trucks was forbidden by their grandmother: even now they knew she watched them from the low kitchen window.

"Jump in," said Tony and the little sisters with another exchange of mischievous looks, scrambled up.

"Going to the store?" he inquired.

The answer came piecemeal.

"Yes." "For coffee."

No more was said on the brief trip and the little girls climbed out the truck soberly and marched with dignity into the store. Tony followed, exchanging with Walter and Mabel a smile at the expense of his late passengers. Ruth 'n Rose, their errand forgotten, began to play with Davie Wilkie, and not until Mabel left could Walter get them to state why they came.

Albert Horner drove up for gas as Ruth 'n Rose left the store. He looked after them, and Walter, as he hung the hose back on the pump, followed his gaze.

"Kids do grow up!" he observed.

"Yes -- and we do grow old!"

.....

Inside the tall, shabby house behind the store, Griselda awakened from her nap. She had not seen Mabel Wilkie after all for Mabel, on learning that the old woman was asleep, had not stayed. And Griselda had forgotten that Ethel had been there.

She awoke lively and exhilarated, with words upon her lips. Mrs. Priddle, hearing her speak, entered and heard,

"... so many things I had to do first."

"Did you call me?" asked the housekeeper.

"And I waited twenty years for a settled home!" said Griselda. Her tone was friendly and conversational. "And as long after we came here for us to take this trip."

Uneasily, Mrs. Priddle realized that the hearing aid was not connected. She linked the little dangling plug and wires, and spoke again.

"Did you call me?"

Griselda started violently. "For heaven's sake! Where did <u>you</u> come from -- following a person around!"

"I 'eard you speak..."

"What of it, woman?" demanded Griselda angrily. "Do I always have to be speaking to you?"

The animation went out of her, and she said vaguely, "I was dreaming....I could see again, an' hear the sea..."

Two tears ran down her wasted cheeks. "Bring me the big sea-shell," she said, and sat silently caressing the smooth, pearly lip, the rough spiny bulge of the shell until Walter came in from the store.

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END OF AN ERA

There was silence in Mrs. Kerrigan's parlor after her son snapped off the radio.

"Well," said Walter aimlessly at last. "Nothing new. I guess.."

"I can't believe it!" Maude Horner's voice shook, her workworn hands twisted nervously in her lap. "It doesn't seem long since Albert went to the war, and now..."

She looked at her husband with a sort of desperation, and by common impulse they both glanced out to the ball diamond. It was Sunday afternoon: the ball game by now should have been well under way. But there was no game. The men and boys who usually played stood around by twos and threes,

or sat on the steps of the hall, talking...

Mrs. Priddle, who had paused in the doorway to listen to the news broadcast, stood bewildered, her black, shoe-button eyes blank.

"Me daughter..." She gulped and began again. "Me daughter's got three little ones an' livin' in London-- if they should start bombing like they done before..."

Emma Burton had so far said nothing, but her gaze had gone to the ball-diamond even before the Horners looked that way. She looked at Mrs. Priddle now and spoke,

"Mother..?"

"I'll go," said the housekeeper, and began to climb the stairs. She pattered across the upper hall: they heard a murmur from the sickroom.

"She's awake!" said Emma. "I'm going up -- you better come too, Maude. It won't hurt her, you know, an' she might know you. She'd want you to come."

For Griselda Kerrigan was dying. Whether or not she knew it, her family could not tell. In her lucid moments, since her seizure a few days before, she was so much her old self that they could almost believe that in a day or two she would get up, active, imperious, to resume the pattern of her daily life as she had lived it in the prime of her health and vigor.

Maude Horner followed her broad friend up the narrow, varnished stairs.

"How can these things happen so suddenly?" she wondered. "The war-again- and she is dying, my old friend..."

It all seemed impossible, war and death, here in this house that had always been the same for the twenty years since she came to Canada. And twenty years had dissolved in a flash while a man spoke thousands of miles away and announced that a war had begun...

Walter Kerrigan was tiptoeing up the stairs behind her: Albert followed him to the foot of the stairway and stood looking up.

Griselda was very much herself at the moment. She was scolding Mrs. Priddle.

"What's that? Don't mumble, Priddle! What did you say?"

Mrs. Priddle's answer was indistinct.

"The war? That was over years ago -- before Emma was married..."

"It's another war..." began the housekeeper.

"Another war! Do you mean to say someone's gone and started another war?"

Walter turned on the landing and came downstairs again, and the two men stood at the foot of the stairs looking

out of the glass pane in the front door. In spite of himself, Albert Horner smiled.

"Pity your mothere 'adn't the raisin' of 'im," said Albert. "'E'd never started a war then, bloody little swine!"

The murmur of voices above was continuous for a minute or two, then Maude Horner descended the stairs alone.

"'Ow is she?" demanded Albert.

"She knew me," replied his wife. She took his arm.

"We'll go now, Walter..."

Outside the house the air was warm and dry, good harvest weather. Three of the younger boys were playing catch on the ball diamond. Maude gave them a perfunctory glance and her eyes filled with tears.

"Albert," she said. "How long -- before the boys have to go?"

"Quite a while."

"She was just the same," murmured Maude. "She... she doesn't want to stay in bed! And Mrs. Priddle's dreadfully upset -- she was nearly crying. Mrs. Kerrigan got after her -- 'Stop fussing, woman!'..."

"Of course."

"And then Mrs. Priddle said that again -- about her daughter and the bombing. Mrs. Kerrigan said, "Well, send

for her, Priddle! Don't stand there sniffling -- send for her! There's plenty of room here for her! Bombing indeed!"

"She's still 'erself," said Albert.

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Upstairs in the tall white shabby house, Griselda had relaxed her temporary concentration upon the vexatious realities of life. It was a relief to lie back and rest: she even for the moment ceased to resent her inability to move more than her head and one arm. She had a vaguely satisfied feeling that she had settled some problem for somebody -- Maude Horner? Priddle? It did not seem to matter: there were always people with problems and they always came to her, and she usually could help them.

She turned her head once or twice on the pillow and began to investigate her new and startling ability to interpret things in her life that had never before made sense to her. Bit by bit, year after year, things were coming back, with meaning. It was very interesting, to call up people, dead or alive, to see them before her, and to be able to understand them. Their actions had purpose, their deeds, which had seemed perverse, foolish, or wicked, were reasonable. Oddly enough, the dead were clearer than the living -- they were not clouded by themselves, the blundering selves of those who came and went in the room,

hung over the bed talking nonsense into the hearing-aid that she insisted on keeping plugged in.

"How are you feeling now?"

"Drink your nice milk!"

"Remember me...?"

Griselda had answers to all these questions. Unsaid, but sensible answers.

"I'D FEEL FINE IF YOU DIDN'T KEEP ME IN BED ALL THE TIME!"

"NICE MILK! IT'S HORRIBLE! TAKE IT AWAY AND BRING ME A GOOD HOT CUP OF COFFEE!"

"I'D REMEMBER YOU QUITE WELL IF..."

If you wouldn't obscure yourself talking, questioning, doing... Doing what?

"Things that don't matter!" said Griselda aloud.

"What did she say?" asked Emma's voice with a note of anxiety.

"Did she say something?" That was Walter.

"Mother spoke -- I didn't catch what she said."

There she goes again, thought Griselda, amused. Worrying again! What's she got to worry about, Emma? She's never had anything to worry her because she hasn't lived any more'n a cabbage in the garden -- staying here in one place all her life! At her age, I hadn't even begun to settle in one place!

She pitied Emma for a little while, but recollected suddenly something she had meant to tell her daughter. That the one thing the younger woman had ever done that really mattered was to bring up her children to tell the truth. I should tell her that, reflected Griselda...

Emma's corporeal self, spoon in hand, fat, fussy and concerned, intruded upon Griselda's half-dream. Griselda tried to reject the spoon, failed, swallowed what it contained, and, in disgust, abandoned Emma, real and corporeal. She dipped again into the past. People came -- the dead -- Jasper Kerrigan.

"He looks the same," thought Griselda. "I don't know why I worried so about him always trying something new. I should have seen earlier that he never held a grudge, never said an unkind word to me, and me so snippy at times...He always stood by me...! Thinks the sun rises 'round you' Who said that?"

For a moment or two she struggled with her memory, caught and pinned down the fleeting vision.

"Mrs. Cottle..." She seemed to see the other woman quite clearly -- very clearly. "Is she dead?" thought Griselda. "Dead and gone? Dead or gone? Makes no difference really -- it's the same thing in a way."

Mrs. Cottle was no longer blurred and shapeless. Sharper at the edges, her image was clear to Griselda, distinct, with a dignity of sorts. The dignity of a woman who knew when to go -- when to let go? There was almost a twinkle of fun in Mrs. Cottle's eye.. the fantasy faded.

Had Leona Cottle ceased to be ashamed of Mrs. Cottle? As Griselda lay wondering, the medicine took effect. She slept, with the tang of the sea in her nostrils, the rush and hiss of waves in her ears.

Outside the tall house the wind gathered force. The little pile of withered leaves that Walter had raked together for burning and forgotten, rustled and stirred all over. A tiny whirlwind rushed across the yard, lifted and twirled the leaves, tossing them madly with fragments of dust and blades of dry grass, spun them over the skeleton hedge, into the roadside ditch, over the road and away. Across the stubble field it whirled, daring erratically, to blow itself out in the far distance...

An era was coming to an end.